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Disappearances

luke t. bergeron
Iowa State University

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Disappearances

by

luke t. bergeron

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Deb Marquart, Major Professor
Diane Price-Herndl
Dennis Kelley

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2008

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For my Father

[1] Before

He saw things: a plane crashed on an apartment block, his father on the front porch, an ultrasound full of white static, an old man by a fireside, a young man in an art gallery then up in the mountains, his girlfriend driving her car, empty beds with rustled covers, wrecked cars, dead streets, a black pistol, a waterfall full of cascading blue water. He saw them and forgot them just as easily and that was all for now, and all he knew.

He awoke suddenly, his muscles contracting together like taunt rope, light slamming into his brain so quickly it seemed like it skipped his eyes.

No, that wasn't right. It was the beginning, but it wasn't the right place to start.

Better to begin later. Fast forward six months.

[2] Arizona

"It was the end of the world. Wasn't it?" the young man asked, sitting by the fireside and smoking in the quiet night. His voice echoed off the sandy canyon walls. He spoke this aloud, but his voice sounded awkward to him. It sounded odd because as he spoke it he was aware that he wasn't just speaking to Frank, he was speaking to everyone that was left on Earth, but Frank was the only one there.

Frank took a swig from a brown longneck bottle and grimaced. Warm beer was better than no beer, but not as good as ice cold beer. But ice was hard to find nowadays.

"I suppose it was, Son. Though that's a bit over dramatic way a puttin it, ya ask me." Frank let out a long belch.

The young man shifted his position on his sleeping bag and flicked his cigarette into the fire half-smoked. It was too hot to smoke. The Arizona desert wasn't good for smoking. He liked smoking in the winter more than smoking in the summer. In the winter you could exhale great plumes of smoke and feel like it was all out of you. Smoke in the summer stayed in your lungs too long. That was the way everything was, really.

The night was dark, with no moon. The stars overhead were bright, brighter than any stars he'd ever seen. No live cities in Arizona.

But then, it seemed a bit silly to call this desert Arizona now. He supposed that he and Frank could call things whatever they liked. They could rename the entire goddamn world if they wanted.

"Christ," Frank said. "It runs through ya when you get to be my age." He stood up and walked slowly over to the black Jeep Wrangler parked nearby at the entrance to the canyon. The young man heard a zipper go down, then the sound of water being poured out on the ground.

He was still nursing his first beer of the evening. He'd never been much of a drinker, and now that all beer was warm beer, there was no reason to drink it fast. He took a swig and nestled the bottle back down between two stones so it wouldn't spill. He resettled himself on his sleeping bag, glancing around him.

The fire was the only source of light, so there wasn't much to see. A simple campsite - a fire, their sleeping bags, a pair of coolers, the black Jeep parked nearby. Not much waste. Not that it really mattered much. No one was really around to complain and they'd only been there for

two days. Well, him, anyway. He guessed Frank had been there longer.

Frank came back to the fire and settled down again, leaning back against the canyon wall. His hooked nose sat on a tan, grizzled face under a bright shock of white hair. In the firelight his hair looked yellow, matching his teeth when he smiled lazily. The young man thought Frank looked a little otherworldly in the red glow of the fire. Not just in the fire, though. Frank always looked a little otherworldly.

"Alright, Frank. It's time to talk about what this is about. Since I got out here all we've done is collect supplies and drink warm beer. I thought you had some answers for me. Was I wrong?"

"Sure I got answers, Son. Got questions, too." Frank said. His blue eyes looked up from the fire and stared across it. He shifted his boots in the dirt. "But I think you already know everything I'm gonna tell ya."

The young man was suddenly on his feet, his beer bottle in his hand. "Damn it, Frank, you know I don't know anything, but you do and I've been askin for two fucking days! Stop jerking me around!" He stared at the old man. "What happened, Frank? Where did everyone go? Coz I got a damn good feeling you know more than you're lettin on."

"Like I told ya, Son. Everyone left." Frank picked up a handful of dust from the canyon floor and tossed it into the wind. "Poof. Gone." He grinned his yellow grin again and squeezed out a husky chuckle.

"Fuck!" The young man smashed his beer bottle into the fire, which threatened to go out. The red embers fizzled and the light in the small canyon got dim. "I'm sick of this, man. It's bullshit. I don't know what you think is so fucking funny." He stamped his foot, kicking up dust.

"Sit down, Son. And calm down. Stop yer yammerin. Yeah, I maybe answers for ya. But I gotta know a few things myself." Frank spit out a brown wad of tobacco. "It's different for everyone. I gotta hear how it was for you." He tapped two fingers against his temple. "Gotta figure this out together." Frank winked at the young man.

"What are you talking about?" The young man sat down on his sleeping bag. He didn't know where this was going, but it was more words than Frank had ever strung together before.

Frank looked up at the sky. "Can normally find people right away. But I had a hard time findin ya. Gotta know why first. So sit down and tell me how it was for ya." Frank's eyes looked bright in the red glow of the dying fire.

Something in them told the young man he should sit down. He did.

"What does this have to do with everyone disappearing?" Leo asked.

"I'm gettin to that. Usually's different than this. Find people right after it happens and bring em back and explain it to em so they don't get too scared. Couldn't find ya."

Frank spit into the dust. "So I need ya to tell me how it was, what ya did," he said. "Then we can figure all this out."

"What, like when everyone disappeared?" The young man was skeptical. He picked up a small stone and tossed it out into the night.

"Ayhuh."

"Why does that matter? I don't care about that part. I wanna know what's going on now. I wanna know where everyone went. Do you know or not?" Leo asked. He felt his anger rising again. "Before doesn't really matter."

"Son, take it from me, a man in my line of work, knows that before matters more than now. And the future, well, it ain't happened yet. You follow?"

The young man didn't know exactly what Frank was talking about, but even after only a few days of knowing

him, the young man knew how stubborn Frank could be. Still, and he wasn't sure why, he trusted Frank - the air about Frank seemed slow but powerful, like a gathering storm and the young man wanted to see where the clouds were moving.

"Yeah. I guess," he said.

"So I want ya tell me about it. Take yer time - I wanna know everything."

The young man swallowed thickly. "Alright," he said.

[3] After

Leo woke up at three AM. He wasn't sure what woke him up, he was just suddenly awake, muscles tight, eyes full of unsteady orange light. The clock on the VCR glowed the time.

He thought that a noise woke him, but he couldn't hear anything. He took a deep breath and listened, concentrating. He heard the ringing aftermath of a noise, a dull, rumbling sound, a bassy hum, and then, a crackling like licking flames.

The window in his living room was broken. The blinds were smacking against pane, unsettling the broken glass still in the frame. Leo was on the couch. It was dark, with the flickering orange light coming from the window.

Leo got up slowly and walked over to the window. He stepped on a piece of broken glass and a small sliver stuck up into his heel. He swore. It was stuck in good. Leo almost fell over.

But the sight outside his window was enough to make him forget about his foot. It was crazy. He'd never seen anything like that in his life.

There was an airplane crashed on the street under his fifth story apartment window. It was on fire, blazing like a scene from some Hollywood blockbuster. It was surreal.

There really wasn't any other way to describe it. It was surreal. People used to compare movies to real life, and now people compare real life to movies and that's what the crashed plane was like, it was like a movie and it was surreal.

Except it was more than that, more than movies, more than just plain old real life. Leo couldn't smell the burning jet fuel in movies and black smoke didn't get into his eyes in plain old real life, so it was more than both because he could smell the burning fuel and the smoke was in his eyes, and Leo didn't know what to do.

He just stood there looking at it for a moment. It was crazy. He thought that maybe he was still sleeping. His eyes burned. The orange flames below flickered.

Leo sprinted halfway to the phone, then fell over in pain. That piece of glass in his foot was shoved up inside deep, and he'd forgotten about it. He ripped off his sock and did his best to pull the thing out of his foot with his fingers. They were shaking violently, but he got the shard out out. It came out, but left a small pair of holes in his heel like a snakebite. They started to bleed. He tied his sock around the wounds and stood up to limp to the phone.

The dial tone blared in his ear. He punched in 911 and waited through the rings, no answer, and then a machine. He

ran that over in his mind. An answering machine for 911. What was going on?

"There's a friggin plane crashed outside! Send help!" He yelled into the machine. He was informed he would be helped soon. Stay calm, the machine said.

Sure. Stay calm. Yeah That's easy, Leo thought. His head whirled. You're so sure you can handle it when you're watching a movie in a dark theater, shoving popcorn to your mouth with your free hand. You could kick anyone's ass, drive a truck over a cliff, you could handle anything, like an action hero. Plane crashes outside and you're shaking all over. You can't handle shit.

He dropped the phone and stumbled into the bedroom to pull on shoes and a jacket. He shoved some tissues in a sock and put it on, hoping that would stop the bleeding in his foot. He had to limp, but the elevator in the hallway was still working so he didn't need to take the stairs.

Out on the street the smoke was thick. Black, it poured out of the plane. Leo couldn't see anything. The plane was covered in flames and smoke. The metal body was all torn up, ripped up, holes in it were throwing smoke and flames out. It was pretty in a weird sort of way.

Leo couldn't hear any sirens. The heat was intense, even barely outside the south entrance, a decent ways from

the plane. There wasn't any way Leo could get close to the plane. The heat was too much, the smoke too thick. Leo coughed, squinting his eyes.

Where was everybody? Shouldn't the cops be there by now? The fire station like three blocks away, why wasn't anyone there?

He didn't know what to do, so he just stood there, staring at the wreck until the smoke got so bad he couldn't handle it. His lungs were burning and he couldn't see anything. Leo went back inside, coughing.

[4] Arizona

Leo paused his story and took a sip of beer, grimacing at the warmth. He didn't like thinking about this, and didn't like telling it. It made him feel like he felt then, stupid and helpless.

Frank leveled a stern look at Leo, his eyes blazing over the bright light of the fire. The look said, go on, keep going.

Leo went on, Leo kept going.

[5] After

He stood in the entryway for awhile trying to catch his breath. It was tough. The smoke was in his lungs and the whole world was woozy. He fell over, blacked out.

Next thing he remembered was coming to slowly, lying on the cold tile floor. He saw the green carpet of the doormat up close to his face. It reminded him of grass back at his Mom's house in the suburbs, the shaggy lawn. He didn't know why he thought that, but that's what he thought.

Leo mused that a glass of water would be good, he was ready to go inside and ask his Mom for one. He felt like he'd been sun tanning in the yard. He was thirsty. He blinked.

Slowly, Leo shook off the feeling of home and remembered what was happening. He sat up, leaned against the drywall. He could still see the flames outside the glass door, but they seemed to be lower than before.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but it was raining outside now, raining hard. Leo could feel the cold air and mist coming in through the doorjamb. The rain seemed to be putting out the fires. It was really coming down.

The lobby was smoky, the mailboxes on the wall seemed far away, but Leo didn't want to move yet. He'd heard that when you inhale a bunch of smoke it can mess with your head and he still felt woozy - the world was pulsing around him, coming in and out at the same time with a whooshing sound. He felt sick to his stomach.

After awhile he got to my feet and almost fell over, but steadied himself on the newspaper rack. Back outside the smoke was clearing, a wind had picked up with the rain, and he could see the plane a little clearer. The apartment building across the street was mostly gone, and the parts that were left were on fire.

From where he could see it didn't look like the plane hit his building. That was lucky - if the plane had hit his building, Leo would be dead. But he wasn't. He was alive, and it was a lot to take in.

He shook his head, trying to clear it.

There were still no sirens, no firefighters, no cops. His mind was fuzzy, he didn't know how long he'd been passed out, but that wasn't right. There was no one there. There should be. This place should be crawling with emergency responders. Why wasn't there anyone there?

[6] After

He just stood out on the street by the burning plane and stared at it. He was frozen there, staring at it. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, but must have been hours.

After awhile Leo walked around the whole plane, started yelling, screaming for somebody, anybody, but he got nothing. No one answered. No one came.

It scared the hell out of him, scared him down cold, one of those shivers that started in his gut and sped out to his arms and legs. It ended at his fingertips and they twitched, then moved backwards into his gut again and he quaked all over like a junkie with no fix. Exactly like that. He needed a fix, needed someone to fix this. He needed this to be right.

As he circled the hot aircraft, the rain soaked his clothes all the way though and he couldn't find anybody and he was screaming, screaming, his lungs, his throat, all ached from the smoke and he couldn't stop screaming, screaming, anybody, fucking anybody. Leo shook with it. He needed so much for someone to hear him. And nothing.

The plane burned itself out, or the rain put it out, or...Leo didn't know. Those hours were like a daze. His

throat ached from the screaming. He couldn't stop shivering.

It put something awful in him, something down deep. And it kept growing, all those months alone, alone, alone, all crazy alone. Until the dreams. Until New York. Until the church. Until the radio.

[7] Arizona

The fire was low between them now. Leo was staring at Frank with a strange look on his face. Frank hadn't said anything about the story, he'd only listened.

"I imagine that's enough for tonight, Son. I can figure a little now. But you got a lot more tellin before thing thing's done."

Leo looked at Frank and lit another cigarette, speaking through the smoke as he exhaled.

"You don't make sense, Frank. I dunno what the hell this has to do with what's going on now," Leo said.

"I know that. But I'm gettin a clearer idea of what's goin on. This feels different than it usually is and I gotta think on it some more." Frank laid back on his sleeping bag. "Right now it's time to get some shut eye. It's been a long day."

"You said you'd answer my questions." Leo's voice was dead serious now, he was done with temper tantrums.

Frank sighed. "I dunno that you're ready for everything right yet. So I'm gonna tell ya simple, just for the sake of sleep."

"I'm waiting, Frank." Leo blew a cloud of smoke into the chilly desert air.

"It's like this, Son. I work in an interesting line a work. I help find people, help ease em into findin things out for themselves."

Leo eyed Frank, looking for any hint of insincerity. He found none.

"What, you mean you're some kinda guide?"

Frank smiled. Leo caught half of it from the side in the dying firelight. "I think that's the best way of puttin it. Or at least, better'n most."

"So what are you supposed to guide me through?"

Frank waved his hand in a sweeping motion. "All of this. Your realizin, if ya like. It's hard for me too, Son, coz I'm of a different sorta mind with every person that I guide. I gotta find my own way find a way to talk with ya." He burped and put his hand to his throat. "Ahyuh."

"So why is everyone missing, then? You know that?"

"I can't rightly say. Realizin's different for everyone, it's our job to sort it out why you got this'n."

"What does that mean?" Leo asked. "What does that have to do with everyone being gone?"

Frank propped himself up on one elbow to look at Leo. "People ain't gone, Son. They just ain't connected anymore. They ain't connected to you and you ain't connected to them. That's all I can say about it right now, and it's

more than I wanna speak to it. I'm tired." Frank laid back down.

"Frank, does that mean I'm dead? Are you an spirit or something?" The young man looked distraught when Frank chuckled.

"Nah, Son," Frank said. "You ain't dead."

"What am I supposed to think then? Are you some kinda alien?" Leo was only half serious.

Frank chuckled again. "You watch too many science fiction films, kid. I expect you'll fare a whole lot better you stop makin' assumptions like that."

"I dunno what to think. I woke up three months ago to a plane crash and as far as I knew until I got to New York and heard you over that radio everyone on the friggin' planet was gone. Doesn't that sound like science fiction to you? Doesn't that sound like I'm dead, maybe floating around like a ghost? The world is empty, Frank. As far as I know the only two people on the whole goddamn planet are me and you."

"I don't know much more than you about this, kid. But between the two of us we got some talkin' to do. That's what I do know. It's getting a bit late for that, though. It's about time to turn in." Frank stretched his arms then put his hands under his head.

"Fine. Tomorrow." Leo sighed and lay back on his sleeping bag, looking up at the stars overhead then down at the canyon walls that cradled them. The light of the dying fire cast their shadows against the walls. Their shadows were huge and dim. Leo lay like that for awhile, looking at the fading shadows as the light slowly died.

"Hey Frank," Leo, said.

"What is it, Son?" Frank mumbled, on the edge of sleep.

"I figure, between the two of us, we don't have a chance in hell to repopulate the human race."

Frank chuckled a bit, but he was too close to the edge of sleep to laugh much. Leo starred at the stars until he dropped off the edge also, the blackness of sleep taking him down from the higher climes of awakened consciousness deep into the canyon of dreams. The stars overhead shined brightly, watching the pair sleeping by the dying fire, as if they were the very eyes of God.

[8] Arizona

It was early in the morning. The sun was just beginning to lighten up the sky, chasing away the nighttime shadows and with a pale blue light.

Leo stirred and yawned. He opened his eyes and blinked, staring at Frank like he was squinting through a hurricane. Frank was standing by the ashes of the fire.

"Mornin, Son," Frank said.

Leo mumbled something and rolled over.

Frank stretched, pushing out his arms with balled fists and arching his back. He went over to the Jeep and pulled the cooler from it. Inside, he rummaged around until he found the can of coffee. In a bag he found the percolator.

It took Frank just a few minutes to start a fire, using a newspaper and some kindling. Once the kindling got going Frank added larger pieces of wood. They dried out the morning dew before they caught. Soon, he had a small blaze.

He loaded coffee and water into the percolator and set it down on a flat rock in the fire ring to heat.

While the coffee was heating, Frank sat back against the canyon wall and looked up at the sky. The final vestiges of starlight were almost faded now, and the pale

blue of the morning was beginning to turn into yellows and oranges to the East.

Frank checked the percolator and found that the coffee was boiling up into the cap. That meant it was done. He reached out his hand to take it off the flat rock then pulled his hand back, narrowly preventing a nasty burn.

"Goddamnit."

Frank pulled his sleeve down over his hand and pulled the coffeepot away from the fire to cool. He left it and again sorted through the items in the back of the Jeep.

He moved boxes of canned food, anything fresh in the stores was rotten, a few blankets, a first-aid kit, a 30-06, spare clothes, all these got pushed out of the way until he finally found a plastic bag of Styrofoam cups. He pulled out two.

Back by the fire, Frank settled down on his sleeping bag with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

"Coffee's done, Son. Git it while it's hot."

Leo rolled back over to face the fire and pulled himself from his sleeping bag like a man raising himself up from the dead. He stumbled over to the coffeepot, walking zombie-like, dragging his feet and groaning. He yawned and poured himself a cup. Like Frank, Leo settled back down on his sleeping bag.

Frank stared at the fire and sipped his coffee while Leo woke up. Leo blinked at Frank and squinted, then took a sip of the black coffee with a grimace.

"Ain't got no sugar," Frank said.

Leo nodded and took another sip, his gaze moving from Frank, to the fire, to the shadows still left in the canyon.

"I had a weird dream."

"That so?" said Frank. His interest was betrayed a little too much in his voice, and Leo cast Frank his most awake glance yet.

"Yeah. About my girlfriend's cat."

"Ah?"

Leo stared into space. "I dunno what really happened to that cat. I never really saw it again after I found the airplane. I went back to the place later that day, hung around for a few days after that, but I never saw the cat again."

Frank nodded. Leo talked about his dreams almost every morning since they met, but Frank rarely commented on them. "I imagine it's about time to get up. Get the day started."

Leo shrugged. "Why? You got someplace important to be? I heard you rummaging around this morning - it woke me up."

"Yeah," Frank said, ignoring the barb. "Thought maybe we could use a few things, maybe head into town and see if we could get a little sugar for the coffee. Then we gotta go someplace important. It's why we're here in Arizona."

Leo was curious about that, but didn't say anything. He didn't like talking much in the mornings. He just stood up and started rolling up his sleeping bag.

In the three days they'd been camped in the canyon, they'd always packed up camp in the morning, not that it really mattered, but it seemed to him that it was right. Since everyone had disappeared it the world was reverting to a more natural state - lawns were overgrown by several feet, wildlife was invading the cites, the world was beginning to sort itself out.

Leo wasn't sure how he felt about this, but he didn't like the idea of him and Frank, as the last humans on the planet as far as he knew, making a bigger mess of things.

They packed the Jeep and put sand over the fire as the sun finished rising, chasing the shadows completely out of the canyon. The world was flooded with light, and Leo made a told himself he should pick up some sunglasses in town. The sky was blue and cloudless. It was going to be a hot day in Arizona, even higher up like they were.

[9] Arizona

In the Jeep Frank steered up to the highway. They hadn't been camping in a designated campsite. They'd just pulled off the road to the canyon. After months of rough driving, Leo was surprised that the shocks on the Jeep were still in good shape. It was a sturdy vehicle, a good choice after an apocalypse, if you could call it that.

The sandy country spread out around them as the Jeep moved swiftly down the highway. Not many people were on this road at three AM when everyone disappeared and so there were only a few cars that had careened to the side of the road. That's what the world was like now, a snapshot of civilization, empty at three AM. Vegetation littered the edges of the highway, brush, tough and yellow.

The Jeep's radio crackled with static as they drove, unable to get any signal from defunct radio stations.

"Mind if I put in some music?" Leo asked Frank. Leo liked to listen to music, especially in the morning. The shock of waking up the empty world was sometimes still fresh in the morning, even after six months. Music calmed him. Leo slid a country CD into the Jeep's player.

As he listened and stared out the window, he thought about the music - it was driving, and it was his Dad, both.

"You know," Leo said, musing half to himself and half to Frank, "Music...it's, I dunno. There's something there, you know?"

Frank nodded, never taking his eyes off the road.

[10] Ohio

On a rainy day in Ohio Leo was rooting around under the backseat of the Jeep and he found an old country CD that was in the Jeep before he took it from his neighbor. Leo's father used to like to listen to country, so as he sped down the highway in Ohio, weaving between the wrecked vehicles, he popped it in.

On the road, during the six months alone, Leo found himself listening to different music. Before everyone disappeared, he used to listen to underground bands, indie and emo music that made him feel like he was part of a counterculture. He liked knowing he could be sure no one else at a party would like it. Maybe of it was being different, but part of it was just that he was pretty depressed, or, at least he wanted to be.

Underground artists were supposed to be people who were more sensitive to deeper emotional feelings, and mainstream music seemed like it was just channeling mainstream feelings. Leo thought country music was the worst in that regard. Nothing was more mainstream than the feelings of some middle-age guy who was remembering what it was like the first time he made love, or how much he still was in love with his wife of twenty years. How more cliché could you get?

At least, that's how he felt about all that kind of stuff.

When he first got out on the road he brought his music with him - the Jeep had a CD player and he brought all his CDs. He thought it would be good to hear human voices over the speakers as he drove around.

Listening to those bands, it almost seemed fitting that this had happened to him. Before everyone disappeared, they'd made him think he knew what life was really about. Or, at least, how mundane it could be. Leo thought was going to carry that feeling into this "after life."

Once he got out on the road, though, he found that he couldn't listen to it. It was depressing. Not real depression, though. All the emo and indie bands that he used to like to listen to were bemoaning all these things that just seemed ridiculous. How could their feigned and trendy loneliness compare with what he was going through? How could their "empty in a crowded room" ideas mean anything when the whole world was empty? They couldn't, really.

Twangy guitars meandered out of the speakers as he drove, filling the cabin of the Jeep with music that Leo would have grimaced at before. But as he avoided a particularly nasty wreck on the outskirts of Columbus, he

found himself smiling as the man on the fifth track played his guitar and sang about how much he missed his childhood home, growing up and working with his Father. The music was mass produced, poppy, terrible schlock, but for some reason Leo liked it.

It reminded him of his father, and on that morning as he drove, it felt a whole hell of a lot more real to be thinking about his Father, remembering him and smiling, than to be trying to feel depressed because life was a dull and endless chasm, or some nonsense like that. He felt good listening to that country music. It made him want to celebrate human life, especially now that it was gone.

[11] Arizona

"Hey, Frank, what was your father like?" Leo asked as they drove down the highway toward town. Without any cars in the last six months, a layer of sand and dust had settled over the highway. The Jeep kicked it up as they drove, leaving a track like cars during a snowstorm.

Frank just grunted and spit out the window. Leo seemed to take it in stride, even after only two full days with Frank, Leo knew that he didn't like to talk much. "You got a family?" Leo paused.

Frank said nothing as he steered the Jeep around a wreck. He just shrugged.

"My family is all broken up," Leo said.

[12] Before

Every summer after Leo's parents divorced he would go out to Maine to see his father. Leo's father lived on a small lake outside a small town. He had three and a half acres of woods spread out in a line between the main road and the lake. His big red house was down a long dirt driveway from the road, close to the lake.

During a summer when Leo was thirteen his father decided to build a dock down on the edge of the water, something to sit on and for Leo's stepmom to lay out on during the day. He started on a Saturday, when he wasn't working.

Leo's father worked as a carpenter, for himself, buying up small pieces of property by lakes and building little camps on them. He had a good eye for land, and always turned a nice profit on the camps he built since he did all the labor himself. He could spend ten grand on a little lot, another ten on building materials, and in a month and a half have a little camp he could put back up on the market for eighty.

Sometimes they sold right away, sometimes they'd sit for six months, but he always moved them. People liked him and he liked to talk them into buying his properties. His zeal for it infected his buyers, the way he could visualize

a piece of land and see something greater in it. He had a knack for it, buildings, land, and talking to people.

That summer when Leo was thirteen his father had enough scraps of lumber from building camps that he decided to take them and build a dock on his own land. He'd been saying he was going to do it for years, but Leo's father was the type of guy that would happily live in a shack if he had cold beer and a bed - he didn't usually spend much time working on his own house. Sometimes, Leo's stepmom would even hire his father to remodel the kitchen or the bathroom, just so he'd do a little work on his own house, which was never done.

He was already started on the dock when Leo got down to the water that Saturday. He liked to get up early. Leo didn't.

He was knee deep in the water, bare feet, green pants rolled up, nails stuck in his mouth, with his shirt off, hammering together the frame. He's built part of the frame, the basic box, on the beach sand he'd brought in the summer before. The wood he was using was pressure treated, left over from decks, so it was heavy, and after the basic box and legs were built he'd dragged it out into the water to lay in the rest of the supporting crossbeams. There were drag marks in the sand.

Leo's father's hair was beginning to turn grey, even then. He was only in his mid-forties, but he worked hard, in the sun, and it took a toll on him. He was in great shape, physical work suited him, but he was getting older. His back bothered him sometimes.

He didn't seem old that day. He was full of pep. Leo walked over the sand to his father. A small radio was blaring country music from a large rock on the edge of the water.

"Hey, Old Man."

"Leo," he chuckled. "You wasted half the day. It's," he checked his watch, "ten already. You just get up?"

"Yeah, I stayed up late reading."

"Ya never gonna get a day job you keep sleeping in all the time. Ah, but you're young, ya got time." He laughed again then took a swig from a silver can in a koozy that he had nestled in one of his shoes on the nearby rock.

He grunted. "Nice day out here. Getting pretty warm." He squinted at Leo and rubbed water from the lake on his bare chest, then splashed some over his shoulders. "Ya come to help?"

"Nah, Dad, I just thought I'd watch. It's still a little early, you know?" Leo grinned at him. "Thought maybe I'd take a swim."

He nodded. Leo could tell his father was a little buzzed, but it was endearing. His father had a way of looking like he was serious and joking at the same time. His eyes would crinkle up, their brown gaining a darker gleam, and he would pull his lips back in a sort of grimace.

"Good day for it." He grunted again, taking another swig and nodding "Ayhuh. Good day for it."

"Finally building that dock, huh?" Leo shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand.

"Yeah, I thought it'd be nice to have something to sit on down here. Since I got that sand put in Dawn's always complaining about getting sand on her ass." He snickered.

"Thought I'd put in a dock, you know?" He swiveled his head about on his neck as he talked, as if something was constricting his airflow.

Leo's father then proceeded to explain the entire process of building the dock to Leo, from the basic frame, to where he got the wood, to the different types of wood he was using, to the whole structure, and how many nails he was going put in to tack down the platform. Leo didn't ask for about any of this, but he didn't mind hearing it. Leo was pretty sure his father just took his presence as wanting to know.

And he did want to know. Well, no, that wasn't really true. Leo didn't care at all about how to make docks. But his father cared about docks, if for no other reason than he happened to be building one when Leo came to talk to him.

It's funny, if I was at a party and I was talking to some guy and he was telling me about how to make docks, I'd be craning my neck around, trying to find my friends to get outta the conversation. But when my Dad talked about docks, I wanted to know.

So much so, in fact, that when Leo's father got done with his speech Leo got him started again. Leo know it was easy to start his father up again by just asking a couple of questions. His father would go back into big explanations all over again. He didn't mind repeating himself. Leo didn't really mind it either. He enjoyed it.

[13] Before

It was the best example of how he and his father were.

Leo would sit there, sometimes helping his father hold up a framing board, or nailing down the end if Leo could get his father to let him, and listen to him talk about whatever he wanted. That day it was docks. Other days it was the weather, or camping, or bow hunting, or some show on the Discovery Channel the night before. But they never talked about anything deep or serious.

But it didn't really matter and Leo didn't really care since he didn't talk much around his father anyway. Even then Leo was already reading a lot, reading some things that his father could have understood if Leo explained them, but Leo didn't.

His father wasn't a stupid man, far from it. He was a financial genius. That's just the way it was with him. Leo and his father were different, but there was something about his father and those topical conversations that was, Leo didn't know any other way to put it, real.

It wasn't that way with Leo's mom. Leo and his mom were great friends. Leo was the oldest and she used to come to him for advice on his little brother and sister. He talked to her, even gave her advice, but he listened to his

father. Leo's Mom was his Mom, but his Dad was still his Father. That was the best way of summing it up.

They built the dock together that Saturday, Leo mostly sitting there, asking his father questions now and then whenever he fell silent, concentrating. Leo didn't like it when his father wasn't talking, his father had a way about him that made Leo wonder if he was thinking things he wanted to know. So Leo tried to keep him talking. Mostly his father just jabbered on about the dock, the conversation occasionally straying to what Leo'd been reading or learning in school, but it was soon back to conversation topics he knew about, or was interested in. It wasn't that Leo's father wasn't interested in what Leo was doing, it was more that when Leo was around him Leo wasn't interested in himself. Leo was interested in what his father had to say.

With Leo's help, his father finished the dock about mid-afternoon. Leo never took his swim. He just sat there all day talking to his father, handing nails, holding down boards. Afterwards they stood on the dock and looked out over the water. It was shining in the sunlight, a dark shimmering pool of blacks and blues, surrounded by the green of the forest and the white rocks. They stood above the water on a platform that they'd created, an artificial

structure that separated them from nature, but connected Leo with his father. The wind blew through their hair and Leo felt a bit like a father/son pair that He'd read about that summer in a book about Greek mythology, Daedalus and Icarus. Leo hoped he could take my wax wings and fly high enough to make his father proud. Maybe that's why Icarus flew so high that his wings melted. He was trying to impress his father.

[14] Before

Later, the night after Leo and his father built the dock, Leo stayed up late reading. When the entire house was asleep, he crept down the well-trod path to the lake again. The moon was up and the woods were black instead of green. The water was black and lapping against the new pressure treated support poles under the dock. He stepped out onto it and a peculiar feeling came over him.

It was a quiet night, the only sounds were the bullfrogs in the lapping water. A slight breeze picked up that made him shiver and rub his arms. The moonlight was casting a white sheen over the water, bright enough that it was difficult to see the stars overhead.

Leo's parents divorced when he was seven, and he spent a lot of time growing up after that, in his room, reading by himself. He was a kid who could always entertain himself, either with characters that authors' made up, or his own. He always had people around, even when he was by himself, but that night, that night alone on the dock, when he was thirteen, staring out over the glistening black water and listening to the lap of the waves, was the first time he ever felt truly alone.

It made him shiver. It was a weird juxtaposition, to be standing on the dock that he'd just built with his

father that day, had bonded over, and to feel like he was the only person left on the planet. It was a feeling he came to get used to over the years, as he grew up and everyone seemed different, separate, but that first time, that night alone on the dock, by the water, was the most intense. It might have been the most intense feeling Leo ever had in his entire life. He'd often wondered since, since everyone disappeared, if his whole life he was preparing for this, this life, this life afterwards, preparing for a life that was really, truly alone.

It wasn't Alone, though, really. He had experience with Alone. It was more than that.

It was Loneliness. The Loneliness that would later seem like it was his whole life. Seem like it was so much that it became it in the most extreme form.

[15] Arizona

Frank steered the Jeep into a ghost town. It could have been any random town in the middle of the desert after the apocalypse. Leo imagined tumbleweeds blowing through town right before a showdown in some old Western movie, though he saw none. Cars were lined up on the sides of the streets like horses outside saloons. The sun shone overheard, unblinking.

They drove through the town, looking for a grocery store or convenience shop to get supplies. They needed water and food. The gas in the Jeep was fine for now.

While they looked around for a store Frank drove the Jeep through a small residential neighborhood and Leo looked out the windows at the houses. The yards that had grass were overgrown and dead, filled with brown weeds and dry flowers. No one was around to water and trim the lawns. Some houses had toys in the yards, big plastic castles made by toy companies for children to romp in. Most of the play equipment had the dusty stains of pooled water which had dried, leaving brown circles of dust. One white house had a basketball hoop over the garage, a half deflated basketball in the driveway next to a blue sedan.

"All these houses look like they had kids," Leo said. He thought of the deflated basketball as they passed a deserted community center.

Frank, his big gnarled hands manipulating the steering wheel, said nothing. His mouth was set in a grim line that he looked reticent to open.

Leo sighed. He was getting used to Frank's silence, but was desperate to get some answers. He thought about Tamara, she used to say that Leo was impatient, but, he'd been waiting months. And now, it seemed like the source of his answers was sitting the seat next to him, but was unwilling. Leo wasn't sure how much longer he could wait - after all he'd been through so far, his trials, his travels, he'd held his patience in his hands like dying edelweiss and he felt it withering.

"Keep looking for a store," Frank finally said, as they drove out of the residential area and into a commercial district. Leo shrugged and looked away from Frank and out the window again. He knew they needed supplies, but it was hard to focus on the mundane. He spaced off again, looking for comfort in his old memories, something he'd been doing more and more of late. Leo was thinking about Tamara again when Frank found a small grocery store on the south side of town.

[16] Arizona

They pulled the Jeep into the empty parking lot. Leo grabbed the crowbar from under his seat. He was getting pretty good at breaking in, after all his supply runs while he was traveling alone before he met Frank, so he was the one who smashed the glass door to let them inside.

Leo and Frank gingerly stepped over the smashed glass, carefully slipping in through the broken door. Inside the grocery store the sunlight barely penetrated past the dark cash registers. Leo grabbed a shopping cart and steered it past the registers, down into the aisles, its small wheels squeaking. His flashlight beam guided their way like the light on a miner's cap, lighting up the tall stacks of soup and vegetable cans, their brightly colored labels dim in the light of the beam. The linoleum floor clicked under their boots.

After the ride in the Jeep, Leo was having trouble keeping his thoughts on what he was doing. Instead, his thoughts were still wandering over Tamara, the memories of her superimposed across the dark setting around him. It was a jarring juxtaposition, the bright sunny memories shopping with her and the lifeless store he now found himself in. They used to go grocery shopping together in a small market like this after she moved in. They didn't like the same

food - she was more of a health food junkie, eating things that Leo didn't like, so they usually had separate baskets.

"Hey," Frank growled. Leo realized he was stopped in front of a display of candy bars, staring at it in the semidarkness. "Pay attention to what yer doing. We don't have time to just stand around in here."

"Why does it matter?" Leo asked. "Why can't I just stand here all day?" His bitter laugh echoed throughout the dark store. It sounded odd to him, a bit too loud, a bit too eager. "We got all the time in the world, Frank, right?"

Frank grumbled something Leo couldn't hear and moved further into the store. Leo grabbed a pair of sunglasses off a nearby rack and pushed the cart too fast to catch up with Frank, like a kid following his hurrying father.

The smell hit them as they moved up the first aisle, the smell of rotting meat and bad produce. Leo heard somewhere, before all this happened, that rotting chicken smells just like dead human bodies, and it was that smell of death that crept up their noses as they marched further into the store. It was like a mix of feces and damp rot percolating in some sort of large crock-pot. He pulled the thin neck of his shirt up over his face to try to block the

smell. It didn't help much, just mixed the smell with his own sweaty unshowered stench. Frank seemed unfazed.

Leo guided the cart down the aisle, tossing random cans into their cart without reading the labels. He didn't bother shining the light on the cans - the smell was bad enough that he didn't want to stay in the store long. It reminded him of a Tupperware bowl of chicken and rice he'd left in the back of the fridge for months until it rotted. Tamara found it one day but wouldn't clean it out - she said it was his mess. When he finally did manage to get it out of the fridge to put it down the garbage disposal he gagged while the disposal ground up the rotten, moldy food and pulled it down the drain. Tamara opened up all the windows and they went out to eat that night while the smell dissipated. Leo remembered not having much of an appetite, though they'd gone to one of their favorite Mexican places.

In the back of the store, close to the seafood counter, the stench was at its worst. Leo could almost see the reek as a stock of dead ghosts, like the spirits of rotting bodies over a battlefield. The beam of the high-powered flashlight glided over the banks of rotted fish, seeming to guide the stench to his nose like a lighthouse guiding ships home from the open sea. He hated the smell of

fresh seafood, let alone this. He gagged, but his stomach held.

"Frank," Leo said, his voice muffled by his shirt. "We gotta get outta here. This is awful." Frank paused, a box of salted crackers in each hand.

"It don't smell good. Just focus on what you're doing." He dumped the crackers into the cart. "You ain't smelled anything like this before? Ain't you been to a grocery store since..." He trailed off.

"Since what, Frank?" Leo asked. Frank just shrugged and grabbed more crackers. "Since what? What were you gonna call it? Frank?" Leo voice followed Frank down the produce aisle as Frank walked out of his sight.

Leo followed him, shining the flashlight over the rotten vegetables. Some were dried and stale, but others looked squishy and slimy. Once Leo left an onion and a head of lettuce in the produce drawer for a month and when he finally cleaned it out after he noticed Tamara using the top shelf in the fridge for her vegetables, the lettuce and onion looked like this, all their water bled out of them, pooled at the bottom of the drawer. Then, and now, small fruit flies circled in the air.

[17] Arizona

"Frank, goddamn it!" Leo cried as Frank disappeared around a corner again, leaving the produce aisle.

Leo found Frank two aisles over, paused by a shelf of bottled water, grabbing as many bottles as he could before returning to their cart. Frank dumped them into the cart unceremoniously and walked off toward the granola bars, stacked on shelves in the fifth aisle. Leo gave up trying to get answers and just followed him with the cart, grumbling, up and down the dark aisles, until the smell finally became too much to handle. His head was pounding and he felt something coming up from his guts. He stopped pushing the cart to wrench on the dusty linoleum floor. With the light still on the cart, he couldn't see his sick hit, but he heard it splatter, wet and thick against the floor. The sound threatened to make him sick again, but instead he just ran down the aisle, past the dead registers, and out to the light outside.

The warm desert air of the parking lot calmed Leo's breathing. The smell gradually left his lungs and mouth as he sat down on the curb in the empty parking lot, his head down, his arms draped over his knees, breathing heavy. He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt, leaving a gross green stain on the white fabric by his shoulder.

[18] Arizona

"I just don't get some people," Leo told the ghost of Tamara in his mind, trailing back to conversation they'd had after buying groceries one afternoon. "I mean, that fight we saw, right in the produce aisle, that skinny guy in his silly bow-tie, yelling at his wife about string beans, it was like watching some old episode of the honeymooners." Leo copped an impression and made a fist, "'Pow, right to the moon!'"

The fragmented Tamara, an ethereal memory, giggled next to him sitting on the curb just like she'd sat in the passenger seat as they drove home with groceries in the backseat. Her reddish hair shone in the sunlight, swaying as she laughed, then stopped moving as she sobered.

"I guess some people have bigger problems than us. Some people just take things too hard. It kinda puts things into perspective, you know?" she said. God, Leo thought, not really listening, his thoughts on the curbside bleeding into the memory, she looked beautiful. He tried not to think about how much he missed her.

"Yeah," his memory said. "I guess it does."

"Look, Leo, I've been thinking, I mean, seeing that made me think a little, you know? And the problems you've been having with my Dad, I...well, maybe you should just

chill out a little, have a little more patience. He'll come around, but it takes him awhile, just don't rush him. I don't want things like that to get in our way, I mean, I don't want to get so stressed out together that we end up like that guy and his wife, fighting over string beans in the produce aisle."

"Yeah," he said, "I guess I'll talk to him, tell him he can get back to me when he's ready."

She smiled, lighting up her face. The memory strengthened. It was easy to remember her smiles. He sat on the curb and focused on that, watching her turn up the car stereo to dance in the seat. She squealed. "I love this song!"

[19] Arizona

Frank appeared several minutes later, breaking Leo from his reverie to get the crowbar, then ducked back inside to crack the door open enough to bring out the cart. Leo helped him load the supplies from the cart in the backseat of the Jeep, then returned the cart to the corral. Old habits, he guessed.

Back on the highway, Leo tried talking to Frank again. "Look, Frank," he said. "I don't know why you're so stubborn about talking to me. I don't know what you've got planned. I just want to know what's going on."

Frank nodded. "Yeah," he said. "You got a lot you want to know and I got a lot I want to know. But that ain't the right way to go about it. Things come when they need to. We got our supplies. It's time to go find out what needs to come next."

They were outside town now, driving back out into the desert.

"What's that?"

"There's a place we need to go today, something you need to do. We're going to the Mouth," Frank said.

"What's the Mouth?" Leo asked.

"It's why we're in Arizona. There are some places, Son, important places, and the Mouth is one of 'em. We're going there to find out what to do next."

"Yeah, but—"

"It's a decent drive," Frank interrupted him. "No point of gettin ahead of ourselves. Why don't you keep tellin me yer story?"

"I already told you about the day everyone disappeared. What else do you want to know?"

Frank scanned the desert horizon. "I need to know about yer life before. It'll help me get a handle on things."

Leo sighed. There wasn't much point resisting Frank. And maybe Frank was right, things would come when they needed to. "Well, Frank," Leo said. "Then let me tell you about Tamara."

Frank nodded, steering the car out into the thick of the desert. The wind picked up, swirling sand and dust around the Jeep as they drove, out past the camp and the canyon, and into the reddish golden light of the desert.

[20] Before

Leo met Tamara when he was in the middle of a rough time. He'd been through some tough things with his girlfriend at the time, a girl named Jenny. He'd quit his job, stopped attending classes, almost dropped out of school.

He met Tamara in the only class he was still attending that semester, a poetry class. He'd been trying to keep up his attendance in that class because the writing helped him - he'd always been a writer, but the poetry class gave him the chance to write stuff that was a little more personal. He wrote a lot of thinly veiled poems about Jenny and his father.

His professor said that his poems were good, he just needed a little work to make them clearer, easier to understand. Leo didn't want to do that, though. It was easier to write things that kept his meaning veiled.

Tamara was a thin redheaded girl who wrote poems about paintings and her poetry was the only stuff in the class that he liked. He kept his eye on her in class, he'd zone out when the class was workshopping his poems, not really listening to their comments, just staring at Tamara. She dressed in a sort of neo-hippie style, with flowing broom

skirts and tank tops. He tried to sit across her in the semicircle so he could look at her.

One day, after class, when he was collecting his stuff, Tamara walked over to him. He could smell her perfume before he looked up from packing his bag.

"I like what you write," she said. She leaned closer to him, keeping her voice in a low whisper. "Most of the stuff people write in here is total bullshit."

He looked up at her and nodded. She was pretty, but not overly so, a thin face with big, sensuous lips a little too large for her face. Her red hair hung down, framing her hazel eyes.

"Yeah."

She shifted her stance, transferring her books into the other arm. "You maybe wanna get some coffee?"

Leo thought about it. He didn't really have anything to do. "Yeah. Sure."

Outside the building, in the sunlight, Tamara's skirts swished around her legs as they walked to the Union to get coffee at the student coffee shop. Leo wobbled a bit as they walked, sometimes brushing a little too close to her.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's alright." She smiled.

They had coffee that day, and almost every day after class. Leo was reluctant to talk at first, he'd listen to her talk about her friends, her family, but once she got him to open up, the entire story of Jenny and what had happened with her poured out of him like water from a broken levee. She listened calmly, sipping her coffee, sometimes asking a question to clarify a point, but mostly staying silent.

One day he apologized for talking so much.

"It's alright," she said. "You seem like you need to talk about this."

And that's how it went. At least, until he remarked to Jenny that he'd been hanging out with Tamara.

Jenny flipped out, screamed, threw a tantrum, throwing pots against the wall in the kitchen.

"You fuck!" she yelled at him. "You're fucking cheating on me with this girl, aren't you? Admit it!"

But he wasn't. He'd never touched Tamara like that, though a few times he had almost kissed her, wanted to kiss her, leaning over the table. But Leo was smart enough to know that it was just a crush. Tamara listened to him, that's all.

He didn't say anything about the fight to Tamara. The reality of the thing was, he did like Tamara, and he didn't

want her to know - it might kill what they had, and Leo needed it more than air, needed someone to just listen to him.

[21] Before

After a few weeks of hanging out with Tamara, he kicked Jenny out of his apartment, told her never to come back, told her he didn't wanna see her anymore.

"I knew it," she told him. "You are cheating on me with that whore from your class."

He shook his head.

"Fine, you asshole. Fuck you then." She left.

Leo never saw her again. Sometimes, in the weeks after that, Jenny would call him on his cell phone at two in the morning, waking him up and begging him to take her back. Sometimes she would scream at him, sometimes she would cry and moan that she loved him, that they were meant for each other. He didn't really say much during these conversations, though he never hung up on her.

Sometimes they would talk until the sun rose and the battery in his phone would die, cutting them off. Later, when she got a hold of him again, she would accuse him of hanging up on her. She couldn't see his shrug, over the phone line.

[22] Before

After Jenny left, hanging out with Tamara breathed fresh air back into his life. He started going to all his classes again. Most of them he was too far behind in and was forced to drop, but he didn't care. His life was getting back together.

He got a new job at the film developing counter in the grocery store that Tamara worked in so he could see her everyday, not just the days that they had class together.

He started running again, something he'd always loved to do. He'd run late at night just to watch his shadow move under streetlights as he jogged up the street.

As he recovered, Tamara and Leo became close friends. They hung out all the time, in class, after class, at work, but Leo was careful to keep it platonic. Sometimes they had moments that were a little awkward, but Leo would always steer the conversation back to something a little more comfortable by telling a joke. One of his favorites was the one about baking muffins.

"Hey, Tam."

"Huh?" She looked up from the open chemistry book, spread out before her. They were studying at her place.

"What?"

"So these two muffins were baking in an oven, right?"
he grinned.

"Oh, God, Leo, not this joke again," she groaned at him and rolled her eyes.

"And one muffin looks at the other one and says, 'Hey, it's getting kinda hot in here, right?' And the other muffin looks back and says--"

"Jesus Christ! A talking muffin!" she laughed at him and hit him in the side of the head with a pillow from the bed.

"Hey!" Leo said, tossing the pillow back at her.
"You've heard this one before!"

"Only every five minutes. And why do muffins always sound like they're gangsters from the New Jersey mafia?"

How they laughed together, Leo and Tamara. Then she would look at him, her hazel eyes trying to stare in to him, get in to him, and Leo could tell it, he knew it, and he would turn back to his own textbook, somber, and avoiding her eyes.

[23] Arizona

Leo paused the story. "Look, Can I ask you something, Frank?"

Frank nodded.

"Why do you want to hear all this, anyway? I don't know what my life has to do with you."

"It matters." Frank turned off the highway onto a dirt road. Leo heard the crunch of gravel under the tires.

"I know that, but I don't really know why, or how, Frank. I don't really know why you want to hear it."

Frank took one hand off the wheel and wiped the palm on his jeans, then did the same for the other. "It matters because I'm here because of you, Son. This whole thing that happened, it's all because of you."

"And that makes me inta somethin' I ain't never been. This, I reckon." Frank pulled one hand off the wheel in a sweeping motion. "And this place, too, it's all this way because of the way yer story is. That's why it matters."

"What do you mean?"

Frank pulled a bottle of water from the cup holder and opened it with one hand to take a long swig. Leo watched Frank's Adam's apple move up and down. "I been through a lot a things in my time, Son." Frank took another sip and grimaced. "Ayuh. A lot a things. I been all over, in all

types a places different'n this. They're all the same, but they're all different. I mean ta say, I'm different."

"I don't understand. How are you different?"

"You and yer need ta understand. Some things is just the way they is, Son. Thisn's one of 'em."

"Yeah, but..." Leo trailed off.

"Some folks got this notion that we're all solid folks, I guess, that we're always the same, like waterin' holes is always gonna be there. But it ain't that way. The water in them holes is all over the place, at one time or another. It's been in the ground, and in oceans, and in storms. Folks is more like storms, Son, spreadin' stories like water all over the place, nurturin' things, dryin' up others. But the storm keeps movin', keeps changing, and so does the stuff in the storm. I'm more like that than most. I'm like rain seed that keeps others workin'," Frank said.

"So you move from storm to storm?" Leo asked.

"I do."

"That must be tiring," Leo said.

Frank got a funny look on his face and sighed. "It is. I can't imagine nothin' more tiring than that."

[24] Before

It went well after that, with Leo and Tamara. After Jenny was gone for good, after she stopped calling completely, Leo relaxed back into a life of comfortable routine. He wasn't really happy, not bouncing full of joy, anyway, but life was decent. That's the thing about comfortable routines, Leo knew. They were comfortable, and that was all, that was their boon and their downfall.

He was set again in school, working at the photo counter, but the only real joy in his life was on the days he saw Tamara. He didn't really recognize it as joy at the time, though. Joy is an explosion in the moment, but something that you can really only appreciate in retrospect. Leo realized that in the months after everyone disappeared.

It was there, though, the joy Leo felt.

There was more, of course, more in between, but it didn't really matter. All that's important is that Leo calmed down with his worries about Tamara and him, being away from Jenny helped with that, and they got closer. Finally, it got close enough he had to do something about it.

He asked her soon after that. He got over all the remainder of his doubt, the remnant of fears he had after

Jenny, and just plain asked her. It was an awkward question when it finally came tumbling out his mouth, clumsy and gulping for air like a newborn. They were at his place, looking out over the street from his balcony.

"Leo, I was worried we'd have to talk about that sometime."

That wasn't the response he'd been expecting.

She continued, "I can't do that right now. It takes time."

"How much time, Tam? I mean, we've practically been together for months now. I thought you were just waiting for me to ask."

She chewed her lip and looked out from his balcony, scanning the street with her eyes. "Well, I have been, but not for exactly the reason that..."

"What?"

Tamara pointed down at a maple tree growing underneath them. It was a tree that Leo often admired from his balcony. The tree was tall and strong, beautiful, with wide, three-pronged leaves. The base was thick, supporting a wide canopy of branches. "It's like that tree, Leo."

"What does that have to do with—"

"Just listen to me for a moment, okay? You see that tree down there, right?"

"Yeah, sure, I look at that tree all the time."

"Well, It's pretty, right?"

"Yeah," Leo said.

"So what happens when you leave this apartment?"

Tamara asked.

"Uh...well, it stays there."

"Yeah, it does. So the only time that you can enjoy that tree, it's when you're standing on this balcony looking at it, right? Since you can't take it with you when you move."

"Uh, I guess." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Because if you tried to take that tree with you, if you tried to move it somewhere else when you moved to another it would die. So you have to leave it there."

"Tam, are you trying to say you're like a tree? This sounds like bullshit," Leo threw his hands up. In those days, before the long drives alone, he was quick to annoyance.

"No, Leo, just listen for a moment. You have to leave the tree there, where it can grow, and if you try to move it, it'll die. You can't take the tree anywhere else, anywhere else that you go - it has to stay there to live. It's not bullshit, and I'm different like that. Leo, when I

see a tree under a balcony or even flowers, girls always like flowers, right?"

"Sure."

"Well, say that you bought some girl flowers - she'd take the flowers and put them in a vase on her table and in a few days they would die. If you'd just left the flowers in the dirt, growing, well they could have lasted longer. They would have lived longer and..."

Tamara looked up at Leo's face. "Oh, I'm not explaining this right."

She sighed and looked down at the tree again, then put her hands against her cheeks. She shook her head and took a deep breath.

"I'm not like other people, Leo. I don't need to own things to love them. I love that tree down there, it's beautiful, just like flowers are beautiful in their beds. But taking them into my house and putting them in a vase, or moving that tree, it kills things that people try to own that shouldn't be owned, and I don't want that tree to die, and I don't want flowers to die, Leo. I don't want to die, either."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard," Leo said. "If you didn't want to move in then fine, but just say

that. Why do you have to make it this whole bunch of bullshit?" Leo was on the verge of yelling.

Tamara's voice was stone calm. "Look, I know you don't believe in much, Leo, but I know wisdom when I see it. It is about owing and being owed. *It is*, even if you don't think it is. I love you, Leo, I do, but I can't owe you anything without not being myself anymore. Maybe someday, but not now. I'm not ready to be in a vase in on your kitchen table or a tree under your window. Not yet."

Now Leo was yelling, "You're just being selfish!"

Tamara flinched, but still stayed calm. She grabbed his arm with both hands. "Think about it like this, all day every day people do what they don't wanna do. They go to work because they have to, they drive places to get things they need but don't really want, they see people they don't like because they have to, they owe things."

Leo didn't say anything.

"I don't wanna owe you anything, Leo. I don't wanna see you because I have to, spend time with you because I have to. You can't get around some owing, but I want at least one person in my life that I *get* to see, not *have* to see."

"That's cold. You don't know what you're talking about."

Tamara didn't say anything, she just opened the door and went inside, leaving Leo standing on the balcony by himself, looking down at the tree underneath him and trying to figure Tamara out.

[25] Arizona

"That's the thing about Tamara, Frank," Leo said. They were deep into the desert now. All signs of civilization were miles away.

"She knew who she was." Leo lit a cigarette.

Frank nodded, his hands on the wheel.

"It took me months to convince her to move in. She kept saying that it was too close to what she was worried about with all that owning stuff. I finally got her to agree, though. I mean, I get what she was talking about, but still, it was a little overboard."

Leo didn't think Frank was going to respond, but then he did. "Son, I don't normally get in the way of yer story or how ya tell it. I just listen, I reckon. But there's chances sometimes for me to help ya a bit, especially with things still tumblin round in yer mind. Thisn's one of 'em." Frank looked up. He reached deep in his coat pocket, pulled a tin of tobacco, and dipped.

"Okay..."

"That girl a yours, she's right. Not just about ownin things, that bit's easy ta see. I mean more than that. All day long people are meetin and doin things together. Ya walk down the street and ya pass fifteen others goin' the opposite way. Ya go to the bank and ya put in money and ya

talk to the teller. Ya go git breakfast at the diner, you and waitress talk a bit, even if it's just about what yer orderin and what ya owe her for it." Frank spat brown juice out the window.

"You think about that waitress fer a moment. You picture what she looks like up here." Frank put two fingers on his temple and spat again.

Leo thought about it.

"Say that you git breakfast from her one morning and you tell her ta have a nice day. Maybe she does. It wasn't all because you said it, but waitressin's hard work and the nicer folks is, the easier it is. Maybe she spends her whole day havin a nice one, and then gits hit by a car on the way home. It kills her."

"That's sad."

"Don't go worryin yer head about it, this is just an example. But say, anyway, it kills her. Well, by any notion you've done her a service, wishin her a nice day. Her last one alive, it coulda been shit and it coulda been nice and it was nice. Follow?"

"I guess."

"Ya didn't have ta make her day nice, did ya? All you was required ta do was eat yer food and pay her and maybe tip her if ya thought she was good. But ya did a little

extra and it was worth it, even if ya never heard about it again, never saw her pitcher in the paper the next day."

"Yeah." Leo took a drag and exhaled.

"Well, there ya have it. The entire fuckin' human experience in a goddamn nutshell. Coz we's all dying, Leo, make no bones." Frank chuckled and then started coughing, wheezing. He flashed yellow teeth at Leo. "Though I reckon we all make bones eventually."

"I'm still not sure I--"

"Christ, Son. I'm not sure they come denser'n you." Frank spit. "That waitress there, ya made her day better, her last one. That's the meaningful part, right?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, it was her last day--"

"Wrong! The meaningful part is that ya made her day. Coz not one of us's got very many. It mighta been her last day, it mighta not, but we all only got eighty goddamn years if we're lucky and most of us not even that. It don't make a lick a difference if it was her last day or not. In the entire grand spectrum of the universe, Son, we's all in our last days, even before we begin 'em." His eyes flashed and his laughs turned to wheezes again.

"That makes what yer girl was sayin pretty damn important and pretty damn right." Frank leaned against the rock again. He spat out the wad of tobacco, then dropped

his chin to his chest and tipped up the end of his bottle.

"There's enough of owin' and not enough of doin' on purpose."

[26] Before

When she moved in, she brought a few things and her cat with her. It was sudden, her finally coming, and when she showed up at his doorway, a cat carrier in one hand and a duffle bag in the other, Leo wasn't sure he was ready for it.

"Here, take this," she said, handing him the duffle bag. "Jeeves has been whining like crazy. I'm going to feed her to try to calm her down."

Leo watched Tamara open the carrier. A twitching black and white cat came out slowly, checking the floor with her paws like it might be made of gas. It wasn't. She bolted, speeding under a nearby chair. Leo dropped down to his knees and looked underneath. Jeeves was quivering, the pupils of her yellow eyes staring back at him, unblinking.

"Just leave her alone for now. She'll get used to it," he heard Tamara call from the kitchen. "She's just scared."

Her and me both, Leo thought, but put on a neutral face. This was his choice. He wanted it. He reminded himself of that. He went into the kitchen and encircled Tamara with his arms. He kissed the freckles on her bare shoulder.

"Hey, c'mon," she said, a can of cat food in one hand, opener in the other. "I'm trying to...Leo! That tickles!" She turned around, returning the tickling fingers.

Everything collapsed into that moment. It was going to be okay. Leo knew it was going to be okay.

[27] Arizona

"And that was that, Frank. She moved in. We lived together for a year before everyone disappeared," Leo said. He finished his smoke and flicked the cherry off the end. "Hey, look, I wanted to ask you about something else, something you said a few minutes ago."

Frank nodded, staying silent.

"When you were talking about us only having a few years, I, well, I don't get it. I've been thinking about it, the way you contacted me, the way you were just there at the right moment. You, you've got more than that, right? I mean, you're like me, are you, Frank? You're something else."

Frank breathed a deep breath in through his nose. He stared forward through the windshield. "In a way, Son. In a way. But not really. I just ain't exactly like you, if that's what ya mean."

"Then why did you say that?"

Frank sighed. "Ya git used ta sayin certain things ta people after awhile, things that's right for them, but not fer you. I've got less years than you, really. Once we're done with what we're doin, and we're moving along nicely, well, it's over then, and I'm somewhere else, with someone else. I'm not the same. I'm different. It ain't like bein

the same all the time, or at least feelin like I am, like you do."

"Like I do?"

"Like you're always the same guy, I mean. Ya got these memories of bein' and they stack up on top of themselves, like a pile of wood, until you got enough ta last ya for as long as they need ta. It makes ya feel like one whole pile, even though there ain't no center log. All ya is is just chords and chords of wood, all stacked up together in a pile, but ya see the whole pile and that's it. Ya don't see the separate logs. I ain't like that. I move on, and when I move on I'll take a few logs from another pile that I ain't started and I build a pile next ta it. But it ain't mine, and I ain't gonna be able ta keep it."

"So, you mean when we're all done, when we've finished with whatever this is, figured out what happened, you'll go somewhere else? You'll be someone else? With someone else like me?"

Frank looked up through the open top of the Jeep and squinted at the sun. "That's about the long and short of it, Son."

"Can you ever stop? Can you ever rest?"

Frank picked at a hangnail, looking down at his old, gnarled hands. "I dunno. Maybe someday. When it's all done, whatever that means."

[28] Arizona

Frank steered the Jeep down the dirt road, out into the deep desert. Leo watched the dusty scenery speed by outside the lowered windows of the Jeep. They passed large rock formations, whittled down by wind and long dry rivers. The Jeep drove down into a dry riverbed, almost bottoming out as it pushed down into a deep ditch then came back up on the other side.

The riverbed brought them to the mouth of a huge formation of red and yellow rock, which came up on both sides. In the distance, Leo could see the back of the rock formation, seeing that it formed a large "U" shape. Frank stopped the Jeep by pulling up the parking brake. The dust that had been following them rushed past them, into the "U" then dissipated. They got out.

Stunted cacti surrounded the Jeep on two sides, mixed in with yellow brush and grass. Leo caught a glimpse of a small lizard before it darted under a nearby rock. Large boulders framed the sandy floor of the "U."

"What is this place?" Leo asked. "Why are we out here?" He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about Frank had shifted on the ride out from the town, something was different, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

"This is the Mouth, like I told ya back in town." Frank said. "We're here so you can listen to it." He didn't say anything more, just opened up the trunk of the Jeep and started rummaging around inside.

"What does that mean? Why is it called that?"

Leo heard Frank's muffled voice from inside the Jeep. "It's called that because it speaks. You can take any meanin' from that ya wish. You'll hear more soon enough."

Not sure quite what to make of that, but unwilling to press Frank any further, Leo looked around him again. The sky above was a bright cloudless blue. The sun hung slightly under midway across the sky, telling him it was about eleven o'clock. The wind was muffled here inside the Mouth, it wisped in from the opening at the front, but died quickly, buffeted up against the other three walls.

Frank walked toward him from the back of the Jeep, holding two bottles of water. "Follow me."

Leo followed Frank deeper into the Mouth, toward the back wall. Leo estimated that the back wall was about a hundred yards away. As they walked toward it, Frank leading, the two sides closed in on them - Leo realized that the Mouth was more of a "V" than a "U" as he'd first thought.

The rocky sand underfoot crunched as they walked.

"Where are we going?" Leo asked, about halfway to the back wall. He was ready to hear that the back wall was their destination.

"Up to the top," Frank said.

At the very back of the Mouth, Frank began to follow a very faint path up the side of the rock. It was steep in many places, and Leo had to use his hands to pull himself up over the large boulders that had fallen onto the path. Some of the largest had grooves in them almost like steps, telling Leo that those rocks predated the path, or had been there for a long time.

The minutes poured down as they climbed the path, mimicking the sweat that poured off Leo's body. He was getting used to being in the desert, his body was sweating less and conserving much of his water, but today had turned out to be very hot, and he wished he'd though to bring his hat and sunglasses from the Jeep.

[29] Arizona

It took Frank and Leo about thirty minutes to climb to the top of the Mouth. As they crested the final bolder Leo saw the desert spread out around them in a glorious view. The sandy floor far below looked like a vast ocean of tiny granules.

On the top of the rise, between the twin arms of the Mouth, lay a flat area with two sandstone rocks. The tops were worn smooth, like the footholds in the lower boulders, to make them look like seats. Leo thought that the seats didn't look like they'd been here, eons ago, when the Mouth was being formed by the wind and water that worked in a geologic time he was barely even able to fathom. The seats looked like they'd been placed here, with a reason and a sense of purpose, though he couldn't imagine how or by whom they had been carried up the path to this place.

Leo felt a strange looking at the place, as if he was walking through old ruins. Again, just like the recent change he'd sensed in Frank, he was unable to put his finger on it, but there was something important here.

"What is this?" he asked.

"This is the place to listen to the Mouth," Frank said.

Leo didn't quite know what to say. Something in Frank's voice, even Frank's phrasing, had definitely changed since the morning. He wanted to ask more questions, but the words were dust in his mouth.

Frank walked over to one of the seats, the slightly smaller of the two worn rocks, and sat down. He beckoned for Leo to sit on the other. Frank closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, then opened them as Leo sat down.

"Listen to me now, Son, even if you don't understand everythin' I need ta say, ya gotta listen well."

Leo nodded.

"This Mouth is an important place. It has a way of taking a man to places he's never been, and back to places he's forgotten. It brings up somethin' deep and needful inside a man that ain't never been before. Or maybe it has been, but ain't been let out."

"I, uh--"

"Listen, I said!" Frank shushed him, then glanced up at the place of the sun in the sky. "The things I need ta tell ya here can't be spoken anywhere else and we don't have much time before you need ta start. So let me talk and stop yer silly questions."

Leo nodded again, feeling a bit sheepish for being rebuked, but burning with curiosity. Maybe he was finally going to get some answers.

"There are places in this world that ain't like any others. They all got specific reason for bein and this is one of those places. This place speaks things that need ta be heard. There are others like it, but this is one of the most powerful, and the best one for what's happenin to ya now."

Leo bit back his questions, wanting to ask about the other places, about what needed to be heard, but he kept Frank's wishes and stayed silent. There was a lump in his throat as he balanced on the rock. His fingers felt tingly and he slowly became more aware of the wind in his ears as he waited for Frank to speak again.

"Son, we've got into a situation that there ain't no easy way out of. You got some things about ya that I can't make no easy sense of. I reckon this Mouth'll help us some. The thing is, this place is dangerous, or it can be, at certain times, and this'in is one of them times."

Leo nodded, not quite sure he understood, but committing himself to listen.

"First thing we need to do is get ya ready. Pull yer feet up on the seat, like this." Frank pulled his legs up to sit Indian style. Leo copied him.

"Good," Frank said, taking a small leather pouch from the chest pocket of his shirt. The pouch looked old and worn, like a wallet a man had carried for many, many years. Frank unzipped the pouch and took out a corncob pipe. He loaded it with a mixture of what looked liked white and blue flower petals. He sang to himself under his breath. It took a few minutes to load the pipe, and while he was doing it Leo watched and shifted on the seat, a bit uncomfortable. He was thirsty and hot, though the wind helped a little.

"This is," Frank finally said, then followed it with a word that Leo didn't understand. "Roughly, that means 'mother' or somethin akin to that. That's the best waya puttin it." Frank waved his hand indicating the Mouth and the vast, spread out desert around it. "This place, well, it's the 'father.'" He said another word that Leo didn't understand. "They work together, ya see."

Leo nodded again. He felt like all he was doing was nodding. None of the things Frank was saying made much sense to him and he was getting a bit anxious trying to figure them out on the fly.

Frank gingerly handed Leo the pipe loaded with the mixture. "Careful now," Frank said. "Don't spill it. That would be awful." Leo took the pipe, unsure of what to do with it. He cradled it in his hands. He smelled the mixture. It smelled sweet, like the potpourri from his parent's bathroom as a child. Frank handed Leo his zippo lighter.

"Take this, but take it long and slow."

Leo put the end of the corncob pipe in his mouth. The end tasted odd, like nothing he'd ever tasted before. Holding the pipe between his teeth, Leo lit the mixture with one hand while shielding the flame from the wind with the other. It was difficult to do - the flame on the zippo tried to rise up and he put it out twice trying to force the flame down into the bowl. On the third time he lit the mixture.

"Good," Frank said. "Take her into you. Hold her there. She helps the father speak to you, helps you hear his language, just like an old married couple." Frank chuckled.

Leo coughed. The smoke was thicker and more pungent than cigarette smoke. It didn't taste like it smelled - it was more bitter than sweet. It reminded him slightly of

sour squash and yams. He almost gagged. "How much do I have to--"

"She'll let you know."

[30] Arizona

Leo kept smoking. Very slowly he became aware of a rising noise and realized that Frank was singing. It was like nothing that he heard before, a droning, melody-less tune that rose and fell with the cadence of the wind. It was a slow song, building and falling, building and falling, but with each rise it seemed to reach higher than before, and with each fall, deeper. Leo closed his eyes and listened to the song as it gained intensity. It was wordless, somehow both soothing and unsettling at the same time. He could feel the rhythms of the song begin to shape the way that he smoked - he began to breathe in as the song rose, the smoke seemed to fill him until he could take no more and he felt like he was going to burst, then he exhaled slowly, falling downward with the song, breathing out the smoke into the increasing wind.

His body felt light, as did his head. Frank hadn't told him to close his eyes, but after smoking with them closed he realized that it had been the right thing to do. He just sat and smoked and listened to the song, rising and falling, like he imagined the deep rhythms of the earth would sound like, if he could hear them. After a short while in the rising wind, Leo wasn't sure if he could tell the difference between the wind and Frank, the two had

blended together with such a fantastic synergy that he couldn't tell them apart.

Slowly at first, then speeding toward him, Leo saw tiny globules of white and blue light expand against the darkness of his closed eyes. The globes floated to meet him, surrounding him, then splashing against his body in wave after wave of a thought crystallization. He realized then that he was seeing his body from the outside, a bright form sitting cross-legged in the darkness. Every part of him was illuminated by the swirling blue and white lights, which he realized looked like the flower petals of the mixture, but only for a few seconds, until they shifted form to spinning globes, then back to petals, swirling, mixing, spinning around his body in an accelerating cyclone.

Leo tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. He watched himself move his hands up to his face, tracing the lines of his cheeks, his chin, with his fingertips. The wind was roaring around him now, a cacophony of sounds like waves against the side of a huge ocean liner, splashing and topped with white caps. The sound seemed to merge with the light, and the light the sound until he was sure he could take no more sensation - he watched his body rise up into the spinning light tornado and then everything flashed,

flashed over and over again as a discordant montage of images exploded into his vision, clashing against each other, laughing, giggling noises, words, all colliding like rocks in a blender.

[31] Arizona

He saw himself walking through New York City, the streets lined with wrecked cars, broken glass littering the streets, crunching under his feet as he tread beneath the skyscrapers like a timid mouse creeping between the legs of giants.

He heard a laugh and looked up to see a vision of Tamara walking into a dark cathedral. Leo followed her inside, into the dim colored light of the nave of the cathedral. He saw himself in the middle of the alter platform in a pool of yellow light, shaking on his knees, a black pistol in his mouth, his eyes squeezed shut, his finger pulling the trigger, achingly slow. Tamara stood behind him between the last two pews, out of his other self's vision, quivering and yelling wordlessly.

Leo turned away from the scene, running, fleeing it, out the cathedral doors, stepping out, stepping out into the bright fluorescent light of the clinic. He saw himself sitting in a maroon chair as Jenny stepped out of the back room, a young nurse guiding her along like an old woman. Jenny's eyes were unfocused, staring into space, and she gripped her stomach with clenched hands. Leo watched himself stand, walk over to Jenny and take her arm.

A white flash again, discordant, jarring, the wind, the noise, rising.

Leo was talking to his father on the steps of his Dad's house, his house, when he was young. His father sat next to him, smoking a cigarette and telling the eight year old Leo what was going to happen, why things were splitting up. He used words that Leo didn't understand, big, awful sounding words that roared into the wind and rushed through the air like bullets.

Leo blinked, the scene going dark. His eyes opened to watch himself in his bedroom, in his apartment, starting awake, a blaze outside the broken window, glass glittering on the floor. He watched himself jump out of bed, throwing off the covers onto the floor, silencing the glitter of the broken glass. The plane, there was a burning plane outside his window.

Tamara laughing in the car next to him, her hair all golden and sunlight. The radio shouting the wind, pouring it out like a stream of gadflies from the mouth of some terrible god.

People on the streets, in cars, asleep in bed, fading, fading out. Some looked surprised, their eyes going wide, their mouths open in wordless O's.

Leo stood on the top of a grand plateau, watching a black Jeep pull up by a fireside. He saw himself get out of the Jeep, take two awkward steps toward the grizzled old man seated by the fire, then drop to his knees. The old man stood up and gestured to a seat next to him. Leo watched himself get up, he watched from the top of the plateau, overlooking the campsite, overlooking the scene, the meeting.

[32] Arizona

More images came then, faster and faster, some flickering by so fast that Leo couldn't find himself in them, he only saw snippets and roaring colors, bleeding by, dripping through his eyes to his mind, the sound of the wind a storm in his ringing ears, the sound and the light blended and merged, the images like debris caught in a tornado.

Leo saw a flash of a young man, standing in front of a painting of old New York. Flash. The young man turned to face him. Flash. The young man smiled, exposing his teeth. Flash. He held out his hand to Leo. Flash. Colors, dripping off the canvas onto the wall, bleeding downward like blood. Flash. The young man turned back to the painting, all the paint run off down the wall in dark streams. Flash. The young man seated by a fire in darkness, surrounded by dim store shelves full of junk food. Flash. The young man by a fire in the mountains. Flash.

The images cascaded around him, whirling so quickly that he couldn't make sense of any of them, they blended and mixed, the sound, Tamara laughing, the click of the pistol as it's cocked, the lights in the desert, the sunset, the lapping waves on the lake, the rhythm, crashing, the light fading, growing darker, rising, rising,

up through the black, clawing his way upward out of the noise, the darkness, the flickering stop motion, the crescendo.

Leo broke the surface and felt the cool water of the mountain lake falling away from him, running down his body in corded rivulets. There was no more sound, no more colors, no more images, only the cool feeling of the water on his skin, cradling him, rippling out from him in every direction. He felt the water surrounding his fingers, twitched them, felt the liquid move through them, tangible and intangible at the same time.

A final flash of green light, and it was over.

[33] Arizona

Leo opened his eyes to see the green sparkle as the sun hit the edge of the horizon, going down behind the distant mountains. He was still sitting on the sandstone rock, cross-legged. Frank was gone.

Leo gingerly uncurled his legs, groaning. He was stiff and his skin felt hot, like it was sunburned. He was tired and thirsty. He lurched with awkward legs over to the two bottles of water Frank had carried up to the mountain earlier and chugged an entire liter without stopping. The water spilled the sides of his mouth and down his chin. The water was warm, almost hot, but he wasn't sure if he'd ever tasted anything so good.

His thirst sated, Leo looked around for Frank. There was no sign of him. He felt weak like he'd just run for miles, or stayed up all night long. He knew he only had two options: stay up on the Mouth, which was getting cooler in the dying sunlight, or stumble down towards the bottom. He picked up the other bottle of water and chose the latter.

On the path down from the top of the Mouth, Leo reviewed the experience in his mind. He was irritated at Frank for leading him to believe that the Mouth would help him answer his questions. He recognized many of the images in his vision, Tamara, the clinic, his father, the plane

crash, New York, but a few of the images were new to him. Who was the young man he'd seen standing by the painting and by the firesides? Why had he felt himself surfacing in a mountain lake? He wasn't sure about either of these two things - he'd never met the young man before, he'd never been in the mountains, let alone swimming there. As he navigated his way downwards he wasn't sure if the experience had answered anything at all. He felt like now he just had more questions.

At the bottom of the path Leo walked out of the twin arms of the Mouth to find Frank leaning against the side of the Jeep. Frank looked at him with piercing eyes, almost as if he was sizing Leo up, then opened the passenger side of the Jeep for him without a word. Leo collapsed into the seat and fell asleep, only waking once to stumble into his sleeping bag once they got back to the campsite.

[34] Arizona

Leo didn't wake up until the next evening, just as the sun was dropping behind the brown and red canyon walls. Unlike his usual fitful sleep, plagued with dreams, his sleep was fulfilling. He felt well rested when he opened his eyes. He was strangely calm and watched the glorious oranges and reds fade as the sun set before he said anything to Frank.

Frank was tending the fire with a stick, poking errant coals back into its glowing heart. He had an eerie glow about him. Leo took this in from his reclined spot on his sleeping bag. The orange light underlit Frank's face, like a flashlight when telling ghost stories to scare children. The light made Frank seem anxious, as did his constant, almost fidgety, fire tending.

Leo shifted in his sleeping bag, stretching out his arms.

"Yer awake," Frank said, without looking up.

"Yes." Leo wasn't sure what else to say. With the calm of the sunset over, the images from his vision tumbled back into his mind.

"I think that it'd be best if ya told me what ya saw yesterday, up in the Mouth," Frank said, finally looking up

at Leo. His eyes looked dark in the orange of his face. Overhead, stars gleamed.

"Well, I'm not really sure how to start. Nothing's ever happened to me like that before. It was crazy. I saw lots of things - images, places from traveling alone, and before everyone disappeared, things from my life, what I did."

"Ya understood all the things ya saw, then? Recognized all of it?" Frank leaned forward over the fire, the orange on his face brightening, his eyes flashing. His white hair fell down over his forehead with the sudden movement. "Ya see anythin' ya didn't know what ta make of?"

Leo felt a shiver pass through his shoulders as he sat up in his sleeping bag, the chilly night air creeping down to his encased body. He shifted, a bit uncomfortable.

"Well, I mean..."

"Yeah?"

"I saw New York, from when I'd been there after everyone disappeared, and Tamara, and my father. I saw Jenny, and I saw myself meeting you, but I wasn't inside my body. I was standing up there." Leo pointed up to a spot high above them, up on the top of the canyon. Frank glanced up.

"I saw everyone disappearing...they looked surprised, all these scenes and images jumbled together and whirled around me, flashing together, getting complicated, it was hard to make sense of any of it. I'm not really sure how that was supposed to help me."

"Ya saw everyone disappearing?"

"Well, not everyone, but some people. They just kind of faded out, slow, like they were turning into ghosts."

"What else? Was there anything else?" Frank was rubbing his hands together and fiddling with a cigarette. He was still leaning forward over toward the fire. His face wavered in the rising waves of heat. The wood popped.

"Well, yeah, there was something else, but I'm not really sure-" Leo paused.

"Yeah? What was it?"

Leo wasn't sure why he didn't want to tell Frank about the young man he saw, or the mountain lake. Something told him that he should keep those details for himself, though he didn't know why. It was a deep feeling, a knowing, something that rose up from an ocean inside him like a cresting wave. Each time he tried to tell Frank about those two visions the cold wave broke over him, reaching higher each time.

"Ah, it's nothing. Nevermind." Leo explained the vision again, from beginning to end, editing the ending to leave out those two sections. "I guess there wasn't anything else."

"Ya sure?"

"Yeah."

Frank relaxed, leaning back against the canyon wall and lighting his cigarette. He exhaled a long plume of smoke into the air. "Well, the Mouth can be a disorientin' place, that's the truth. I can see why ya was confused." He paused for a moment. "If ya think of anything else, ya be sure ta let me know, eh?"

"Yeah, sure thing, Frank."

Frank sat smoking quietly for a few minutes, then finally spoke again. "Anyway, I reckon it would be a good idea to start from the beginning here. Ya told me about the plane crashin' down by yer place, and that first night, but ya haven't told me much else."

Leo nodded.

"The power of the Mouth helps ya remember tha important details, but there's alotta stuff in between that needs explainin' too. If we're gonna sort through this thing, if we're ta make sense of it, I need ta hear that whole story, from beginning ta end."

"But what about what I saw out there in the Mouth? I wanna know what that was about."

Frank shrugged. "We can figure that out when ya tell me what ya know. I don't get all those things ya saw, they were just glimpses, ya see, but I reckon I can make some kinda sense of them when I know where they came from."

"So start from the beginning and don't stop till it's done. I'm beginning ta make sense of some things, but I need ta know more." The fire flickered between them, casting orange light up the canyon walls as Leo began to tell Frank his story.

[35] After

It'd been three days since the night of the plane crash. In that time Leo had been all over the town, looking for people. At first he tried public places, places that were open twenty-four hours, but at the end of the three days he was searching houses at random. He found no one, just empty beds that looked like they'd been slept in, cars parked in driveways or crashed against buildings, like they'd been moving when their drivers disappeared. After the plane burnt itself out he took a crowbar from his toolbox and pried his way into the cockpit. It was empty. He tried calling everyone he knew. He tried all the emergency services but got no response.

He didn't eat anything or sleep the first three days. They seemed like a hazy blur to him as he wandered around, sometimes aimlessly, sometimes going to a specific location. The entire town had been abandoned. The streets were empty. The thing was, he couldn't get any long distant numbers to pickup, either. The radio and television stations were all static or broadcasting dead air.

On the end of third day he was convinced it was a dream. He took a bunch of Tamara's sleeping pills in his apartment in hopes that when he woke up everything would be back to normal. He woke up twenty hours later to a

splitting headache and a painful, empty stomach. He stumbled to the kitchen and to make himself a sandwich.

He was rooting around in the fridge for sliced ham when he noticed that the light in the fridge wasn't on. He tried the kitchen light switch. Nothing. The power was out. He took his sandwich and left the apartment.

All the lights in the hallway were out. The only light came from the battery backup emergency lights. They left an eerie red glow on the business-length carpet of the hallway. The elevator was out, too. He took the stairs down to the street.

The previous three days weren't a dream, but they felt like one. The burnt husk of the plane still lay on the street, the charred shells of the apartment buildings it had set alight still stood, like old boots without feet. For awhile he just stood and looked at the scene, chewing his sandwich slowly. The past three days may as well have been a dream - he remembered crying, screaming, frantically searching, and finding nothing. He felt like he was awake for the first time in a long while.

No, not a dream, he thought. A nightmare.

He walked out to the curb and sat down on it, finishing the crust of his sandwich. He wasn't exactly sure what to do. He was pretty sure that he was the only one in

[36] Arizona

"I mean, fuck, Frank. How do I even describe it? I dunno that I'm doing it justice. Everything, aside from the plane crash, the accidents all over town, everything was the same, but everyone was missing. It was a mindfuck, man.

All the stuff was there, all the stuff that people make and collect and buy and everything, all that stuff was still there, all the cars and gas stations and retail stores and banks and schools and everything, all the infrastructure, but the people weren't. I felt like I was in the middle of a goddamn movie, in some scene where the main character wakes up dazed in a hospital bed and pulls the IV outta his arm, then searches around the town looking for people but can't find anyone.

It was like that. I could almost hear the creepy soundtrack. I felt like I wanted to strain my eyes into the darkness at night to see if I could see the people watching me in a dark movie theater, watching some horror movie and munching on popcorn." Leo lit a cigarette and took a drag. The cherry glowed red in the Arizona night, illuminating his contorted face.

"I'm not sure that you need to describe it anymore than that, Son. That about does it, I think," Frank said.

Leo nodded, about to speak, then paused. He looked up at Frank. "I mean, you must know what I mean, what it was like. It happened to you, too, right? What were you doing when everyone disappeared?"

Frank seemed to cringe. He looked down at the fire and paused, then took a ragged breath and looked up at Leo again. "I...well, it was like you say. Same thing, really," he said hurriedly. "Same as you. No people. Couldn't find no one."

"Where were you?"

"Here, Son. I wasn't far from here. Anyway, that's not important. What did ya do?"

Leo almost protested, wanting to hear more about Frank's time of it, but decided against it. "I was, well, I got it into my head that I should leave town, start looking for people elsewhere. I did, too. Leave, I mean, and looked. Didn't find anyone for a long time, not until you. I heard your broadcast in New York--"

Frank interrupted him. "Don't go gettin' ahead of yerself, Son. I meant right after it happened. What did ya do?"

Leo thought. "I got ready to leave, I guess."

"Good. Let's hear about that."

[37] After

Leo spent the rest of the afternoon in his apartment, staring out the window at the plane wreck and thinking. He'd been out of his head for the past three days, but he tried to think things through logically. Everyone couldn't just have disappeared, so they had to be somewhere else. That made some sense, just that simple idea of movement. It clicked in his mind and he decided that he would assume it. They were elsewhere. That was all he wanted to think about right now. The dead power and empty broadcasts told him that elsewhere, where everyone was, had to be far away, but that just meant he'd need to go further to find them. He tried, with limited success, to keep his mind off the logistical details of moving out that many people, of the empty cars and plane, and just focus on the here and now. That was what he needed to do.

He thought of Tamara as he looked out his window at the broken husk of the plane. The carcass was scorched black. One wing was buried in the burnt apartment building across the street, the other was snapped off and lay next to the plane. Tamara hated planes. She always freaked out whenever they flew together. He used to calm her down by making her focus on the small details, buying the ticket, checking their bags, waiting for boarding, getting on the

plane, putting on the seatbelt, watching the takeoff, and so on. He helped her through it by making her take each small step one at a time. Then the whole daunting prospect of flying from one place to the next, appearing, almost suddenly, thousands of miles away, after being suspended miles above the solid earth, didn't frighten her so much.

That's what he needed to do now. He needed to take one step at a time and not worry about the bigger picture. The bigger picture was what had sent him wandering around in a mad haze for the past three days. The smaller would be best. He needed focus on what he needed to do now.

So he thought about it, trying to keep his thoughts grounded. What did he need to leave town? He made a list on a white message pad he found by the phone: a vehicle, food, maybe some sleeping gear, clothes, toiletries. It was going to be a like camping. He thought about it more. Camping was a good way to think about it. He upgraded the vehicle to something with off-road capabilities and added "gas" to the list. He underlined that one twice. With electricity out, he'd need a way to get gas.

A lack of electricity meant no ice, too, so "food" had to be changed to "non-perishable food."

He spent some time amending the list, expanding it, filling in the main categories with subcategories,

expanding clothes, toiletries and sleeping gear to list specific items. It helped him feel like he was doing something. He felt like he was making progress.

After he was sure that he had considered everything he could possibly need, Leo wrote down places he thought he could obtain all the items on his list. He was stumped by "sturdy, off-road vehicle" and "gas", though. He decided to worry about gas later, but he didn't know what to do about the vehicle.

He began with the apartment, filling a black canvas duffel bag with clothes and toiletries. Once he started working, he was overcome with the desire to get out of the place as fast as possible. A few years before Leo had taken a spur of the moment trip with a buddy to New Orleans. The pair hatched the idea and left within a matter of minutes, their backs adorned with blue packs full of all the necessary items they'd thrown together in a few minutes. The rush of excitement he felt then was similar to the desire that clutched him now. He needed to get his things ready and get on the road. Once he'd made his choice, it seemed inevitable.

He finished packing and strung his arms through the handles of the duffel bag, wearing it like a backpack. He

made another sandwich with food from the fridge. With the power off, the rest of the food inside would soon go bad.

Down on the street with his pack, he checked his list. He had clothes and toiletries - he still needed camping gear and a vehicle. The vehicle needed to come first - he was already loaded down with the heavy duffel bag. He looked out over the wreckage of the plane, glancing up and down the deserted street to think about what to do.

[38] Arizona

"I'd been admiring my neighbor's new Jeep from the balcony of my apartment for weeks before everyone disappeared," Leo told Frank. He pointed over to the Jeep parked on the edge of the camp. "It was a good choice, too, it made it all the way to New York, then here. I had to drive around so many wrecked out cars on the highway - I'm glad I took it."

Frank looked over at the Jeep but said nothing.

Leo face turned somber. "It was hard to take it, though. The way I was raised, my parents, you know, well, the Jeep wasn't mine. Even with no one around it was weird like that. I had to get over it. Eventually it turned into survival. At first though, I still thought about things like money."

Frank nodded.

"I got all these things, from other peoples' places, from stores - we even did it yesterday, you know? See, I remember I used to think, back before all this happened, about what it would be like to just take whatever I wanted, you know, what it would be like to have all the money that I ever wanted, like rich people, or what it would be like to have some other super power, like to be able to find lost things, or walk through walls or something, some kinda

ability to get whatever I wanted without working for it. Everyone dreams about that, right? Even people who have all the money they want, I imagine."

Leo gestured up at the Jeep again. "I took all that stuff in there, even the Jeep, I didn't pay for it, with money or any other way. It still bothers me. We kinda got this idea, people, I mean, that we can take whatever we want just because it's there and no other people are using it. The place we got into with the environment, with oil, and everything else, we just took those things from the places they were without paying for them. Not really, I mean. We paid the people who took them first, but we never really bought them. Never earned them. None of those things that I took, that any of us took, were really ours."

[39] After

Leo checked the black Jeep parked in front of the ranch built three doors down from his apartment building. It was unlocked, but there weren't any keys in the tumbler. He flipped down the sun visor, rummaged through the glove compartment, and dug through the center console with no luck. The keys had to be inside the house. He left his duffel bag in the passenger seat.

It was the spring rainy season, and the lawn already looked a little overgrown. A small plastic tricycle sat in the middle of the long grass, a splash of garish color in the middle of the green carpet. Leo didn't know anything about the people who lived here, but they must have a child.

The paint on front porch was flaking off the old wood, leaving cornflower blue chips strewn about the deck. Leo stepped up toward the door and the boards creaked under his feet, bowing with his weight. He pulled the screen door from the frame and heard the retaining spring stretch. The front door was unlocked.

Inside, Leo took off his shoes in the linoleum entryway and left them by the door. The blinds were down and it was dark inside. The living room was small, crammed with too much furniture for the small space. An old TV sat

across from a faded green knit couch. The coffee table was covered with half-full water glasses and plastic dishwasher safe plates. Endtables, old armchairs and a sewing machine on a folding card table in the corner filled the rest of the space.

Leo heard a scuffling noise from deeper in the house. He froze, halfway across the room. His eyes twitched up past the living room to the small kitchen nook, and back to the corner that began the hallway to the back bedrooms. His pulse quickened.

"Hello?" He asked. The portrait of a Hollywood starlet pinned to the wall didn't respond, but he heard the rustle again.

"Is someone there?" Leo moved slowly toward the back hallway, unsure whether to tiptoe or make noise on purpose. He rounded the corner out of the living room into the hallway, the kitchen nook to his right.

A small fuzzy face peeked out of a side room and looked up at him with yellow eyes.

"Oh," Leo said. "Hey, it's okay. Come on out."

The fuzzy face moved out from the side room. It was followed by an orange haired body and a wagging tail, whipping itself side to side in excitement. The mouth on the fuzzy face opened and whined.

Leo knelt down. "Hey, hey, come here. It's okay."

The small dog came to him, whining and wagging. It licked his palms. A collar tinkled under its neck. Leo checked it.

"Jo," he told her. "Your name is Jo." It felt good to be talking to another living being, something that could actually hear him. Leo scratched the dog behind her ears and let her breathe doggy breath on his face. "Hey, Jo. How are you doing?"

She whined again in response. Leo stood and looked into the side room, finding nothing more than a small utility closet with a washer and dryer. Jo had left puddles and piles on the floor of the room. It didn't smell very good. A pair of empty plastic bowls, each adorned with Jo's name, were on the floor. "You must be hungry, girl."

Leo filled one of the bowls from a bag of dog food he found on a shelf in the utility room. He carried the other to the kitchen and filled it in the sink. He left Jo, drinking and eating ravenously, in the utility room and moved further down the hallway. The first door was a bathroom. He moved on.

The second door was closed. He opened it to find a small bedroom. A twin bed sat in the corner. It was covered with stuffed animals and dolls, a little patch carved out

in the center for a child to sleep. The wallpaper in the room was pink and green with pictures of clowns holding bundles of colored balloons. There was a dresser with a mirror. It was covered with knickknacks, little angel figurines and a play plastic makeup set. Leo opened a wooden jewelry box. A tinkling tune began to play, then quit. He wound the metal key and the tinny music began again.

The box was filled with plastic gems, red and purple. They were strung on white string.

Leo picked up a silver frame next to the jewelry box. It was a cliché family portrait, the kind that every new family takes once the child is old enough. A brown-haired man with a broad face wore a smile that threatened to spill over at the edges. He sat next to a plain-looking blonde woman and held a little girl on his knee. They were posed on grey rock, surrounded by green grass. The dog named Jo stood between the blond woman's knees.

Leo pulled the portrait closer to his face, examining the little girl. Her brown eyes were too big for her face. Her eyes matched the man's. She was missing her front teeth, displayed proudly in her grinning mouth. She was wearing a pastel summer dress. She looked happy.

[40] Arizona

"That little girl messed with me, Frank. Her name was Cassidy. I found a drawing she'd done for her daddy taped to the fridge before I left that house. She signed her name at the bottom in crayon. I took it with me. I took her family picture, too. It's with the drawing in my pack. I don't know where Cassidy is, Frank. I don't know what happened to her, but she couldn't have been more than five years old."

Leo lit a cigarette and took a long drag. He looked up at the sky, a dark colander with holes for stars. "What happened to Cassidy, Frank? I know you know." He looked down, across the fire at Frank. Leo's eyes were urgent, a bit accusatory. "What happened to Cassidy?"

Frank sighed. "She's not here anymore, Son. No one else is here except you and me. They're gone."

"Where did she go? Did she just fade out like the people I saw up at the Mouth? She was sleeping in her bed and then she just faded out just like that?"

"I imagine so. That's what ya saw when ya were up there - the Mouth says a lot of things, but it don't lie none," Frank said. "It don't lie none," he repeated.

Leo paused for a moment, hesitant to ask the next

question. It lay on his tongue like a lead weight. "Is she dead? Is Cassidy dead, Frank?"

Frank was quiet then for a long time. It looked to Leo like he was sorting through his words. Finally, he spoke. "Naw, Son, she ain't dead. She's just ain't here no more."

"What are you saying? Are you giving me some existential bullshit? Like she's not dead, but she's not alive anymore? She's not on Earth? What do you mean? That she just...isn't?"

Frank screwed up his features. "It's not bullshit, nothin' like that. She's still alive, so's her momma and her daddy, too, they're all still alive. That little girl's probably asleep in her bed right now after a full day drawin pictures for her old man. They probably don't even know any different."

"I don't understand."

"She's just not here, not here with us. Here is a big place, there are alotta distances that are so big they ain't easily crossed. Son, ya need ta understand that. Here isn't just what ya can see around it, it goes further than that."

Leo looked at Frank, still unable to comprehend.

Frank sighed again. "I can see that ya don't know what I mean. I'll try to get it out, wrap yer mind around it as best I can."

Leo nodded solemnly.

"Let me start simple, Son. You ever been to China?"

"No."

"But ya know it's there, even though ya never seen it."

"I guess," Leo said. "I mean, sure, it's a real place. A billion people live there."

"You just gotta trust me on this, Son, when I say all those people are still alive and okay. You gotta believe in it like you believed in China even though you never saw it."

"What?"

"You never saw it, you never went there, but you know it was real, even though you couldn't see it. It was someplace you never been. It's like that, Son, take that notion and stretch it out some, make it big. There are plenty of places you ain't never been that are real. Some'a those places are all mixed up with the others, copies and copies of the same thing all mixed around and squished in on top of each other."

"Umm," Leo said.

"This planet, she spins around every day, keeps moving around the sun and everyone on it spins and travels right along with it. Sometimes people get stuck and people stop moving, for whatever reason that is. I can't rightly tell ya why. And someone's got ta come on in and help those people sort it all out."

"Like you, Frank? You help people sort things out?"

"I do."

"I'm stuck?"

"That's the way that it seems, Son. That's why I'm here."

[41] After

After Leo left Cassidy's room he opened the last door to her parents' bedroom. It was small and crammed with too much furniture like the rest of the house. Leo wasn't sure what Cassidy's parents would do if they had another kid. They'd have to get a new place somewhere else, he guessed.

On top of the scratched bureau Leo found a set of keys with the cardboard tag from the dealer still attached to the ring. It had the Jeep logo on it. With the little girl's room fresh in his mind, Leo didn't want to linger in the house any longer. He pocketed the keys and left the bedroom before he saw any more. He didn't want to imagine what the family's life had been like.

Leo found Jo in the kitchen, sniffing at the base of the refrigerator. Stuck to the fridge was the drawing Cassidy drew for her father. Leo stared at it, then took it off the fridge. He went back to Cassidy's room and took the picture of her family. He folded the white construction paper drawing around the small silver frame and stuck them in his back pocket. He wasn't sure why he did it, but he wanted to keep them with him for some reason.

Jo, her stomach full, followed him from room to room. He wasn't exactly sure what to do with her. He couldn't just leave her there, she'd starve to death in a matter of

a few days. She'd die of thirst before she starved, he guessed.

"Come on, Jo," he told her while he slipped back into his shoes in the entryway. "You have to come with me."

She wiggled between his legs, almost toppling him over, balanced as he was on one foot, pulling his shoe on. He opened the door, then the screen. She followed him out onto the porch. He turned around to close up the house behind him.

Once she was outside, Jo ran. She took off down the street, pausing for only a second to sniff at the base of a street lamp halfway down the block.

"JO!" Leo bellowed after her. "Come back! Jo!" Leo chased her, he sprinted after her all the way to the end of the block, but couldn't catch up. He ran behind her as she disappeared into the distance, trying in vain to catch up to the small dog. "Goddamn it! Jo!"

He yelled for her for fifteen minutes, walking up the next block to the corner he'd caught his last glimpse, but she didn't come back. She was gone.

Leo slowly walked back to the house, breathing raggedly. He kicked a trashcan on the curb in frustration. "Goddamn it!" he said, over and over.

Back at the Jeep, Leo slipped into the front seat. He gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, feeling his forearms tighten and loosen in time to his gasping lungfuls of air. He slammed his palm on the dash.

[42] Arizona

"I was pissed, Frank. That stupid dog was the only thing I'd found living since everyone disappeared. I sat there for awhile, then drove around the neighborhood in the Jeep looking for her. I couldn't find her. It occurred to me, as I was speeding up and down the streets looking for that stupid dog, that there were probably tons of animals trapped inside houses. Cats, dogs, fish, turtles, rabbits, all kinds of pets that people had that were going to die because their owners were gone."

Leo got up out of his sleeping bag and put on his shoes. He leaned against the canyon wall.

"I couldn't let them all out, Frank. I needed to keep looking. Later on, when I was in other towns, raiding houses for food, I found dead animals. They were rotting because people needed to keep them trapped inside. It seems stupid, Frank. What's with that? Why were the people gone but the animals still around?"

"I can't explain that, Son. It's always different."

[43] After

Leo finally gave up after driving around the neighborhood for hours. It was getting dark. He drove back to his apartment and collapsed onto his bed to sleep the rest of the day and the whole night. He'd meant to leave town that day, but it'd been a long day.

The next morning he collected his pack again and left his apartment for the last time. He needed to find camping supplies and nonperishable food before he left town. Once he got slipped into the Jeep, stowing his pack in the back, he realized he'd need to find gas first. The gauge on the console showed the tank was almost empty. Leo knew how it felt.

[44] Arizona

"That's about all of it, that part at least," Leo said. He took off his shoes and lay down on his sleeping bag. "I think I might get some sleep now. I'm still kind of worn out from yesterday at the Mouth."

"Alright, Son."

Leo slipped into his sleeping bag and closed his eyes, trying to sleep. He couldn't. His thoughts kept going back to that day in his neighbors' house, looking at Cassidy's picture. He still had her picture with him, along with the drawing she'd made for her father - both were in his pack in the Jeep.

He'd never met Cassidy, never seen her in person, and he wasn't sure why seeing her picture had hit him so hard. It was just, it was a child, and maybe that was it, the thing that had been bothering him about Cassidy all along.

"Frank," Leo said, opening his eyes.

Frank was sitting by the fire on his sleeping bag, his hat pulled down over his eyes.

"I have something I need to tell you. It's about Jenny, before I met Tamara. I need to tell you what happened with her."

[45] Before

Leo met Jenny at the Springtown Dinner Theater in the second year of undergrad. It was a place that showed old movies on the weekends, you could sit at a table and order a pitcher, have a smoke, and watch old stuff like Kubric films or *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Leo liked to go there sometimes if he didn't have a party to go to. It was a dark place to drink in, something to do. Jenny wasn't old enough to drink, but since the place was technically a restaurant, even though no one ever ordered any food, they let kids under twenty-one in.

They met because Jenny was in the place one night, moving from table to table looking for old enough to buy her a drink. Most of the old farts who came in there were just there to drink beer and watch the young girls like Jenny try to hustle for liquor, but they weren't stupid enough to actually provide themselves.

Leo didn't think he was either. So when a cute girl with medium length black hair and too much make-up on approached his table, her head cocked coyly to the side, looking at him and swaying her hips, Leo was surprised that he offered before she even asked.

She smiled at him, slowly, and exposing too many teeth. He flagged down the waitress and ordered her a Jack and Coke. The girl pouted at him.

"I couldn't exactly ask you what you wanted in front of her, could I?" he asked. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Jenny," she purred. She brushed her hair back over her shoulder, revealing a leather choker with small metal spikes around her neck. She leaned forward, her breath on his ear, her hand on his thigh. "Thanks for the drink." Jenny pulled back and winked at him.

After the waitress left the drink on the table and walked away, Leo asked Jenny how old she was.

"Twenty," she said.

His left nut she was twenty. Maybe more like eighteen. He told her he thought so.

She smiled at him again. "I'm old enough," she said.

Jenny stayed at his table for the rest of the film as Leo bought her drinks. After the show, he took her out to breakfast at an all night dinner. Later, he took her home and got her phone number.

[46] Before

For the next month and a half Jenny was over at his place almost every single weekend. She'd come over with a couple of friends and they'd stay all weekend, partying, hanging out, that kind of thing. He never really talked to her much, just enough to make plans. Sometimes they talked about music when she was over.

She would show up on Friday nights with a couple of her druggie friends in tow and they would drink until early Sunday morning, stopping only for food and a little sleep. Jenny and Leo didn't sleep together, though. They didn't even really touch each other. Leo really wasn't sure why, he could tell they both wanted to. Well, at least he did. Why else did he let her and her shitty friends stay over all the time? He was sure she knew it, too, and that's why, after a few weekends where he seemed a little pissed off, she did something to keep it interesting.

[47] Before

One Saturday, when everyone was loaded, Jenny dragged Leo back into his bedroom with the pretense of changing the music. As soon as they were inside she shut the door, putting his school pack against it since it didn't lock. He looked at her, wavering a little in the spot he was standing. He wanted her, but said nothing. Leo let girls come to him, when he knew it was time.

She didn't say a word to him, just dropped to her knees and unzipped his fly. Jenny looked up at him then, her mascara-rimmed eyes seeming both seductive and sad at the same time - she liked to drink Jager and Rumplemints on the rocks, called it distilled misery.

With him looking down at her, in his bedroom, the ice in his drink rattling in the glass in his hand, Jenny put her hands on his thighs and whispered up at him, "I want you to come in my mouth."

Then she went to work. And that was that. He was hooked.

She never missed a weekend after that. Always came over. He'd take care of her, feed her, clean her up from whatever she'd done all week. They'd fuck for hours after everyone passed out. Afterwards they'd lie in the darkness and smoke cigarettes while talking about music. It seemed

like the only times they were in the same room together they were fucking or talking about music. When she fell asleep he would sneak out of his bedroom and sleep on the couch. He didn't like to sleep next to her.

She would wake up earlier than him and smoke cigarettes until he woke up with a hangover and she'd go down on him.

In the bedroom she was his, she'd take anything. On top, from behind, against the wall - they knocked the pictures off the wall. He didn't care about her and she took it all.

But not out in the living room, in front of her friends. She heard him talking to one of her friends and knocked him down. He was stupid, he didn't know anything about that. College made you believe that sorta stuff, she'd say. He'd walk drunkenly out of the living room into the kitchen to make another drink and everyone would laugh.

One night they both stayed sober and took a walk down to the park by his house to sit on the swings.

"Do you love me?" she asked him, kicking her feet in the gravel under the swings.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"I don't believe you," she said, then took him in her mouth right there in the park, while he sat on a swing.

Afterwards, she wiped her mouth with her sleeve. There was no moon and the dark trees of the park surrounded them.

"No one can really love anyone," she said, then spat on the gravel.

"Why?"

"You can't really know anyone, can you? I mean, we're all just fucking floating around inside our own heads."

"Nah," Leo said, starting to swing. "That's stupid." He didn't really like to argue with her, he just liked to shut down what she said. She did it to him, in front of her friends.

"It's true. You don't really know me, you just know the me in your head. You can't love something that's just in your head." She chuckled darkly, dropping her hair down over her eyes. "You can't really love something you don't know."

Leo didn't say anything, just followed her back to his place, feeling drained and empty.

[48] Before

After five months of hanging out with Jenny, when school was over, Leo took a trip out to Maine to see his father. It was a different world. Being out there with his father, with his stepmother, his family, something changed in Leo. He knew he'd been walking around, wasting his time, thinking that Jenny was right about everything. It was all bullshit, all that stuff about not loving anyone. His father loved him. His family loved him.

He broke up with Jenny when he got back.

"I dunno if this is working," he told her over the phone as soon as he got off the plane, standing in the terminal waiting for his bags.

"Are you trying to break up with me?" she asked.

"Not trying. Am."

"Leo--"

"I don't care, I don't wanna hear it."

"I'm pregnant."

Silence.

[49] Before

She was, too. At first Leo didn't believe her, he thought it was just a manipulative trick to keep him with her. He took her to the doctor and got the tests done. Positive. Five weeks along. Fuck.

"I don't wanna keep it," she told him in the parking lot.

"Fine," he said. "I'll pay for it." He sure as hell wasn't going to spend his life with someone like that hanging over his head.

He took her to Planned Parenthood. It cost him five hundred bucks. He didn't really have the money, but he didn't care. He read a book in the lobby while they were doing it to her. He sat in a maroon chair.

After an eternity Jenny was back in the lobby, with a nurse holding her up. She looked woozy, wobbling like she was drunk. Her pupils were dilated.

"You have someone to take you home?" the nurse asked her.

Jenny looked at Leo, then smiled at him lazily, like a cat licking her lips.

"Is that your boyfriend?" the nurse asked.

Jenny shook her head. "No," she slurred. "That's my father."

The nurse gave her a funny look. Leo apologized, said he was her boyfriend. He'd take care of her. He carried her out to the car. Jenny made him stop three times on the way back to his place so she could open the door and throw up.

[50] Before

Jenny stayed at his place for the next three weeks straight. He took care of her. She seemed like she was getting better sometimes, then, when he was talking about maybe going out with some friends for a drink, she'd act all sick again and he'd stay in with her.

Things gradually faded back to normal and her friends started hanging out on the weekends again. One thing was different, though - she wouldn't let him touch her, even an arm around her shoulders was too much. She'd shrink away, looking at him accusingly. He wasn't sure why he let her keep staying there. No, that wasn't true. He did. But it wasn't about her.

Leo thought about the dead kid every day. Hell, even after everyone disappeared he still thought about it, driving down the road, the darkness falling, or when the sun was coming up over the trees on the edge of the highway. The kid. He wondered if it would have been a boy or a girl. What would he have named it? He tried to picture its little crinkled up baby face. Most times he couldn't. Sometimes he could. Those were the worst.

Jenny seemed to hate him even before the clinic, but afterwards she hated him more than he thought was possible,

like he'd killed her whole family or something. Leo didn't know that he hadn't. He had killed it, hadn't he?

After two months Jenny went home. She still showed up on the weekends, but there were no more parties, she'd just come over and watch movies for hours on end. Leo didn't even pay attention to her, all he could think about was the kid.

By then school had started again and he was skipping class all the time. He stopped going to work and lost his job. He just laid around in his bed, sometimes watching movies with Jenny when she came over on the weekends. Life wasn't anything he wanted a part of anymore. He'd killed that kid and Jenny blamed the whole thing on him, even though it was her idea. He'd just gone along with it.

He thought it was sadly funny. Back in highschool, Leo used to talk to his friends and tell them that he would never be the type of guy who would do something like that, kill a kid if he got a girl pregnant - he'd stand up, be the man, take his responsibility and bear it, even take the kid if she didn't want it. But when the time came, he folded easily, almost like he wanted it.

Leo thought he wanted it. A month passed and he never left the apartment. He lived on delivery Chinese food when he felt hungry, which wasn't often. He left half-finished

water glasses all over the apartment until they got stale, then he'd drink them. His best friend tried to cheer him up, but got fed up with Leo's attitude and gave up.

"You're in a bad way, man," his best friend said to him. "Maybe you should get some help."

"Yeah," Leo said. And he did. In the only class he was still attending, Leo met Tamara.

[51] Arizona

Leo finished the story and closed his eyes. "Maybe that's why I think about Cassidy so much, Frank," he said. "She reminds me of what I could have had, the kid I never had, maybe the dad I could have been."

Frank nodded.

"Or the man I could have been," Leo whispered to himself. He rolled over and pulled the sleeping bag around himself. "Goodnight, Frank."

"Goodnight, Son," Frank said.

[52] Arizona

The next morning Leo woke up to a slamming sound. He blinked through bleary eyes to see Frank standing in front of the Jeep with his hands on the hood. Leo sat up.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Jeep's broke," Frank said. "Tried to start it this morning and I couldn't. "Battery's dead. I think the alternator might be bad."

Leo slid out of his sleeping bag and put his shoes on. "What should we do?"

Frank wiped his hands on his jeans. "Ain't much we can do. Either way, we need a new battery. Got no other vehicle here to jump it, and if the alternator's bad, we need a new one of those, too. Ain't much point in fixing it when we can just get a new one. Get yer pack together. It's gonna be a hot day and it's a decent hike into town. Best get started while it's still cool."

Leo frowned, then set to readying a backpack with supplies. Lunch, water, sunglasses, he was ready in a few minutes. Frank didn't pack anything - he left it to Leo.

"Could take us most of the day," he said. "I reckon it's about twenty miles into town, give or take."

[53] Arizona

The walked the first mile in silence. Since everyone disappeared, Leo usually spent a little time each morning thinking about his dreams, but the sudden slam of the Jeep's hood had jarred him awake, so he didn't really remember them, just a few shadowy memories.

The sun was barely up in the eastern edge of the sky and already Leo was sweating. Frank was right. It was going to be a hot day. He hoped the four bottles of water in his pack would be enough.

"We got some time, Son," Frank said. "It's gonna be a long day, might as well speed it up. Why don't you keep on with the tellin?"

"Okay," Leo said. "You know, this isn't the first time I've had trouble. Right after everyone left, it was like this, too. After those first few days alone, after I got the Jeep, the tank was running low and I didn't know how I was gonna get gas after the power went out."

Frank and Leo walked on as Leo talked, their boots leaving tracks in the dust.

[54] After

Leo pulled the black Jeep into the filling station, up to the pump. He got out of the Jeep and wiped his sweating forehead with his hand. He unscrewed the gas cap, which hissed like the tank was full of baby snakes. It wasn't full, though. It was almost empty. That's why he was here.

He'd heard somewhere, before everyone disappeared, that gas stations kept their gas underneath the pumps, in a big tank. He thought he'd also heard that there was a way to get to the gas without electricity.

The pump was electric and all the LCD screens on it were blank. The pump had three hoses, each ending in a nozzle with a handle. Leo didn't really know what to do. He supposed he should open it up somehow. He took his crowbar from the back of the Jeep and stood in front of the pump again, studying it. There was a large metal panel under the brackets that held the nozzles. He thought maybe he should start there.

Leo took his crowbar and found a groove on the edge of the large panel. He stuck the crowbar in and tried prying it up, but the crowbar just bent the metal up a little, then the bar came loose in his hands. He tried again, shoving the crowbar deeper in this time, as deep as he could into the groove between the main body of the pump and

the metal panel. He pushed down on it, bearing forward and leaning in.

The metal bent again, quickly, and the crowbar flew off out of his hands and smacked him in the face. Pain flared. Leo fell backward, a little dazed. He felt a warm trickle on his forehead. He wiped his hand across the trickle, expecting to see sweat. His hand came away red. He was bleeding.

Frustration came then. He kicked the pump, then swore at it. He tried the crowbar on the panel again, slamming it into place and ripping with all the strength he could muster. The metal bent more, then the crowbar came flying out at him again. This time he threw up his hands to stop it, and the crowbar smashed into his forearms, which were up to protect his face.

"FUCK!" Leo screamed at the pump. "FUCK YOU!" He grabbed the crowbar up from the pavement and smashed the panel with it, over and over. The metal dented in, buckling in the center, but still stayed attached to the body of the pump. Blood dripped into Leo's eyes, making them sting.

Leo threw the crowbar and the dented panel. The crowbar bounced off the panel and hit Leo in the shin. He ignored the pain and kicked the panel again. His breath roared in and out of his lungs as he picked up the crowbar

again, and jammed it in the panel groove as deep as his could. He yanked it forward, the blood in his eyes. The panel came off the pump and clattered to the cement.

Inside the pump, three thick, rusted pipes ran up from the cement into the main body of the pump, braced with a rusty crossbeam. At the top of the pipes, before they went up into the pump, shutoff valves were welded in. Leo crouched down, examining the valves. They didn't seem to have any outlets, they looked like the valves on the side of the hot water heater in his apartment. They could turn on and off, but didn't have a place to actually let gas out. There didn't look like there was a way to get the pump to work. This was a dead end.

Leo fell back onto the cement and stared at the pump. He tossed the crowbar at it weakly. It clattered to the ground. How the fuck was he gonna get gas? The pump wasn't going to work. Blood dripped in his eyes. He swore. What the fuck was he supposed to do now? How was he gonna do any of this? Everyone was fucking gone, and he needed to move, to get somewhere else, to see if he could find anyone, and he needed to get there fast and it wasn't going to work if he couldn't get gas, and he couldn't keep switching cars, and walking was too slow, and what the fuck happened anyway, where the fuck was everyone? Where the fuck did

everyone go and why the fuck was he still here? What was he supposed to do? Tears began to sting Leo's eyes, diluting the blood that ran into them from his forehead.

He wasn't normally the type of person to cry, but this was too much. All the frustration and pain washed over him, hitting over and over in rising waves, like the buildup to an orgasm. But this wasn't pleasure that rocked him now, it was anger, pain, frustration, all blending together and wracking his body with sobs - great, big, bloody sobs. He lay there on the ground next to the open pump, alone, the blood running into his eyes, his shin and face throbbing, his eyes stinging, the blood pounding in his head, the sun beating down, the air quiet except for a slight breeze and his sobbing, alone, alone, alone, and cried his eyes out for two hours.

This whole thing was fucking pointless.

[55] Arizona

"It was pretty bad at first," Leo told Frank. They were walking slowly under the sun. The desert was spread out around them and they saw mountains in the distance. As flat as it was on the road, Leo didn't feel like they were making much progress.

"I was really lonely. I mean, I was never much of a guy that needed lots of people around, I used to joke with Tamara that if everyone else was gone except her I wouldn't have really noticed, but being completely alone like that, man, I couldn't really handle it."

Frank nodded and took a swig of his bottle of water. There was a circle of sweat above the brim of his hat.

"I looked everywhere for people. I went in houses, I tried calling people before the phones went out, but no one answered. I never found anyone, just that stupid dog, and that's what got to me. It wasn't just being alone really that was rough. It was being reminded that I was alone."

"What do ya mean, reminded? You needed reminding?"

"No," Leo thought about it. "It's the shock of the loneliness, the change from something that used to be full and here."

Leo chewed on his bottom lip. "It's like right after you lose someone that's really important to you. And you

walk around your place, your neighborhood, and everything you see reminds you of the person you lost, and it gets into your guts, it hits you down deep, and you walk around for awhile with this sorrow, this empty feeling in your stomach that you can't do anything about. You keep smells in weird places, a whiff on the couch, or walking down the street, everything reminds you and you hate it, but love it at the same time. It was like that, lonely for someone like that, but with everyone, everyone all at once, all the time."

[56] After

Leo sat up. He pulled himself up off the ground and picked up the crowbar. His body was spent, it ached all over. His chest was sore from crying. His eyes still stung.

He limped over to the Jeep, his shin throbbing where the crowbar had hit it. As he was putting the crowbar in the passenger seat, he caught a glimpse of himself in the side mirror. He looked horrible. His face was puffy and red. The gash on his forehead, above his left eye, nasty looking and swelling, was now mostly clotted, but a little blood still seeped from it. Dried blood and tears were caked under his eyes, giving him a macabre look. His hair had blood in it.

Leo went into the gas station and pulled open the warm cooler, grabbing a bottle of water and a six pack. He cracked the first beer and drank from it greedily, swallowing half of the bottle before dropping it to the floor of the station. It didn't break, but the rest of the beer poured out on the tile. He carried the rest of the six pack and the bottle of water back into the bathroom, the path lit by the afternoon sun coming in through the windows. He tried the Men's door. It was unlocked, but when he pushed it open he realized he couldn't see inside. It

was too dark. Out of habit, Leo tried the lightswitch. It clicked, but no light came on.

Setting the water and beer down, Leo pulled his cigarette lighter from his pocket and lit it. He grabbed a stack of paper towels and went back out into the sunlight, grabbing the beer and water along the way.

Out by the Jeep again, Leo stowed the beer in the passenger seat next to the crowbar, and used the water and paper towels to clean up his face. He studied himself in the rearview mirror, cleaning off most of the caked blood. His face was still red and puffy underneath the blood, but he got most of it off. He couldn't get it out of his hair.

Leo sighed, dropping the bloody paper towels to the cement, along with the bottle of water. It spilled.

What was he going to do about gas? He didn't want to keep switching vehicles - he'd seen enough, just driving around town in the Jeep, that he knew he was going to need a car that would be fine going off road, if only to dodge the wrecks. But if he was going to travel in the Jeep, he'd need a reliable supply of gas to get very far. He didn't want to walk, and he didn't want to try to bike. A motorcycle might be a good idea, but he wouldn't really be able to carry much on it, and he'd still have to worry about gas.

He found himself chuckling then, if only because of the desperation of the thing. He was trapped here, in this town, like a thirsty man on a raft in the middle of the ocean. There was gas all around, but none of it was usable unless he could get to it.

He thought about maybe getting a generator to power the gas pump, but he'd need gas for that too, and he didn't really know how to hook something like that up. He guessed he could get a book or something that might tell him how to do it, but that was a huge amount of effort for something that might not pan out. It wasn't like the electronic card catalog on the computer at the library was going to work anyway.

[57] Arizona

"I felt so stupid once I finally figured it out," Leo told Frank as they walked. "The idea was staring me in the face the whole time, but I just didn't see it. I guess I wasn't really thinking clearly in those first few weeks."

Frank was silent. He wasn't saying much, just enough to keep Leo talking. He didn't need to say anything.

"Tamara ran outta gas one time on the way home from work and I had to go out there, about five miles from the apartment, and help her out. The gas gauge on her new car was broken - later the dealer told her that she must've gotten a lemon. She called me on her cell phone when it happened and I rushed out there to pick her up, but when I got there I realized I hadn't brought any gas. I just kept thinking, on the way, that she was in a bad part of town and I needed to get there quick, and anyway, I had enough gas in my car."

Frank chuckled.

"When I got out there to pick her up I was worried and she was a little freaked out, some guys at the house she was stopped in front of were eyeing her new car. She worked in a bad neighborhood, doing paralegal work. She was finishing her law degree. Those nonprofit legal centers are in aren't exactly in the best parts of town."

Leo squinted, even behind his dark sunglasses. The sun was far overhead now, pouring down a tsunami of heat waves.

"When I got out there she was miffed - she didn't want to leave her car there while I went to get gas so she wouldn't come with me. She was pissed that I didn't bring any. But all I was thinking was that I had to go help her, save her, like, and that I had enough gas in my car for the both of us. It didn't really make sense, once I was standing next to her car, but, you know."

A breeze kicked up, swirled around the walking pair, then died. Frank and Leo trudged on. They were walking down the side of the highway now, the black glare of the road creating mirages in the distance as the heat rose off the asphalt.

"Anyway, I ended up convincing her to come with me to get gas - her car was fine when he got back, but Tamara was pissed for the rest of the night. Thinking about that made me finally figure out what to do."

"Ya figured out that you could siphon from that, eh?"

Leo nodded, "Yeah."

He bent down and scratched his leg under the knee, in the place that the crowbar had hit him the day he was at the gas pump. "It's like being alone after everyone disappeared, after I calmed down, it made me realize how to

think straight. I'd been so caught up in little stuff before, mundane stuff, or whatever, I didn't really stop to think about anything. Afterwards, all I had was time. And the big things became little and the little things, like gas, well, those became big."

[58] After

Leo decided that he needed a hose to be able to siphon gas from other cars. There was so much gas, so many cars - they were parked everywhere. Well, not parked really, but they'd gone off the road, or were stuck in driveways, or parking lots. There was all that gas he could use, as much as he could take, but he needed a hose to siphon it.

He didn't really like the idea of going into a hardware store, but he didn't know where else to get a hose. It seemed silly, like going to a mall in hell - shopping after the apocalypse. Was it shopping if he wasn't going to buy it? Permission to take, to use, that's what money was, that's what shopping was, but Leo didn't need money anymore. He guessed that he's make his own permission with his crowbar.

There was a cop car in the parking lot of Home Depot when Leo pulled the Jeep in. He'd need to get a hose here and siphon from one of the cars in the parking lot - he didn't really have enough gas to make it anywhere else.

Leo pulled up the Jeep next to the cop car and lined up the gas caps. Outside the Jeep and he tried to open the cop car's gas cap. It was locked shut. He needed to pull the release lever in the cab.

The door was locked, so Leo broke the passenger side window of the cop cruiser with the crowbar. It collapsed in with a satisfying crash.

He opened the door through the window and pulled a release lever. The trunk popped open.

He pulled the lever next to it and heard the gas cap release. Leo walked around the back to check if the gas cap on the driver's side was open. It was. As an afterthought, Leo checked in the open trunk.

He rummaged around in the back and found a first aid kit, a mag flashlight, and a black plastic case with metal snaps, like on a briefcase. He opened it.

Inside the case he found a pistol. It was large and black, a Beretta 9mm, with two clips, both loaded. Leo stared at it, then picked up the gun and slipped a clip into it.

It was heavy in his hand, heavier than he thought it was going to be, and it gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight. It was a powerful, nasty thing, but it felt useful and he wanted to keep it. He put it back in the case then took the case and the first aid kit to the Jeep. As an afterthought, remembering the dark bathroom at the gas station, he took the flashlight.

He stowed the gun and the first aid kit in the backseat of the Jeep. A first aid kit was always a good thing to have around, especially since if he got hurt there wasn't anyone who could help him. He shivered.

He hadn't really thought much about getting hurt, but...he touched the gash on his forehead and winced. He didn't really want to think about it too much. If he fell, or broke his leg...he looked at the black case that held the gun. No, he didn't want to think about it. Better to just be prepared, that's all.

Leo closed up the Jeep, taking the flashlight and crowbar with him. The giant megastore loomed over the parking lot, the orange sign smiling at him. *Welcome*, it seemed to say. *Come, take what you need*.

"I intend to," Leo said, walking up to the sliding glass doors. *Enter here*, they said, but did not slide open automatically. Leo almost snickered at that. No electricity. The doors were locked, so Leo smashed at the glass with the crowbar, just like the cop car window. The crowbar just bounced off the glass, threatening to come back and hit him in the face again.

It wasn't actually glass, it was some sort of Plexiglas. Leo squinted in through the scratched window, then he remembered the gun in the Jeep. He'd seen people

shoot out locks in movies. Maybe that would work. He went back to the Jeep and took the gun out of the case, made sure the clip was still loaded, and went back to the doors.

Leo stood in front of the doors, holding the gun in both hands. He didn't really know much about handguns like this, though his Dad had taught him some stuff about shotguns and rifles. He checked the clip, making sure it was snug in the handle, and pulled back the slide to load a bullet. He checked the side of the gun to see if there was a safety switch. There was. He turned it off, hiding the red paint that showed if the safety was on.

[59] Arizona

"It's hard to explain, Frank. Being alone like that, it's about what you do really, not what you think anymore. Everything that you do becomes a sort of ritual, in the way that you think about it, I mean." Leo sighed. "I'm not really explaining it right. I don't really know how to explain it."

Frank sucked on a cigarette and exhaled a great cloud of smoke. "I'm not all that sure I understand what you're talking about, Son."

Leo sighed, pulled in a deep breath, then pushed it back out. The desert air was hot in his lungs. He still wasn't used to Arizona. There wasn't any humidity and the dry air stung his lungs. "You think all the time, when you're talking to people. You're thinking about what you're gonna say, or how to respond, and how you feel about things, right?"

"Sure."

"But after awhile, all you're thinking while you're having a conversation, that sorta stuff just becomes second nature. Kinda like driving a car or something."

"I expect it does."

"It's like that, except it's not thinking about talking anymore, it's doing. You kinda live on this level

that's not really thinking, not really thinking stuff through in words, because it's all feelings, and you don't really need words. There isn't anyone to talk to. But it's not like that right away, not at first. At first you talk to yourself a lot."

"You're talkin' to me now."

"That's different. I mean before, in the six months before I heard your signal in New York. Right after everyone disappeared, and then more and more after that. "

Frank nodded. "Okay."

"But words, you know, words are what make you feel like you lost something. When it's all just doing it's different. Things, your personality even, those feel like they drop away. You think a little at first, like I said, but later it's more just urges. Or feelings. Or, I dunno. I still don't think I'm explaining it right."

[60] After

Leo wasn't really sure he wanted to do this. The gun was in his hand, the safety off, it was aimed at the lock on the glass sliding doors, but he wasn't sure that he really wanted to shoot it.

For one thing, he didn't even know it if would work. Maybe the lock would just get dented, and the doors still wouldn't be open. Or maybe the bullet would ricochet back at him and hit his leg. That would probably kill him. He might bleed to death. He didn't know, but he wasn't really comfortable with the idea of shooting the lock.

Still, he didn't really know how else to get into the store, and he badly needed a hose. There really wasn't any other way around it - he needed to get in there. He sighted down the sights for the third time, lining up the white dash at the front of the gun between the two white dots at the back with on the lock between the two doors. He squinted up his eyes and slowly squeezed the trigger.

The noise of the explosion startled him and he almost dropped the gun. His wrist instantly began to throb from the kick. He transferred the gun to the other hand and shook his wrist. Maybe he hadn't been holding the thing tight enough. It always looked so easy in movies. It wasn't really like that. It was a lot louder in real life.

The lock was gone, though. He'd managed that much. Not broken, just...gone, shot out of the door. He put the gun down on the pavement and pried the doors apart with his crowbar. He was in.

He collected the gun and the crowbar, turned the safety on the gun, and stuck both in his belt. He pulled out the flashlight and went inside the store. With all this gear, maybe he should get a pack or something.

He was surprised by how ordinary everything looked as he swept the beam across the shadows inside the entryway. In the front of the store there was still enough light coming in through the windows that it wasn't completely dark. It was just like being in a room with the blinds shut during the afternoon, there was still enough light to see.

Still, the place looked surreal. Empty cash register stands sat on empty tables in empty checkout lanes. Carts were stacked against the wall across from them, by the doors. The registers were numbers with unlit lights. It was unsettling to see a place like this so empty.

Leo took a cart and walked past the registers, briefly considering opening them up and taking some money. He laughed at the idea. He could rob a bank if he wanted money - he could fill a swimming pool with the stuff if he wanted. It seemed silly. It was silly.

The floor was standard retail store linoleum under his feet, and it looked like it had been freshly waxed not long ago. About two weeks ago, Leo thought. There hadn't been much dust to settle yet, but he knew that if he kept coming in to places without people, places like this, inside places, that pretty soon they were gonna get dusty, start to decay. He wasn't sure that he really wanted to see that.

Not much dust. Not many customers either, Leo thought.

He pushed his cart down the main aisle, lighting his way with the flashlight like a miner in a mine shaft. He swept the light over the signs - Hardware, Power Tools, Light Fixtures. He guessed he needed plumbing supplies. Or maybe gardening equipment. Maybe he could find someone to ask, he thought, and grimaced.

"Excuse me," he said, sweeping the beam of the flashlight down an aisle next to him to reveal a display of lamps. "Do you happen to know where I can find a hose? I'm looking for a clear rubber hose so I can steal gas from the cop car in the parking lot, do you know where I could find something like that? Oh, you do? Wonderful. Point me in the right direction, please."

The darkness, creeping in as he moved away from the front windows and further back into the store, let his joke fall flat. It must have decided he wasn't funny.

You're not funny either, Leo thought, wishing he'd brought a more powerful flashlight. Hell, maybe he should just go over to the flashlight section and pick one up.

[61] Arizona

"The thing that I was talking about, Frank, it didn't happen right away. At first, I talked to myself a lot. It helped to hear a voice, even if it was my own. I was always in weird moods, especially in the first few weeks after everyone disappeared. I'd be all broken up one minute, then feeling better the next, even making jokes to myself. I was all over the place."

"The whole time, it was like I was on this ride at an amusement park, except the ride had two parts, a big one and a small one - I was on the big one from the beginning, that's what broke in New York, I went over the edge, I was finally up high enough that I went down the hill, but the small one was in the first few weeks, when I was still hanging around my city, going up and down, all the time, spinning around all over the place."

"I'm not quite sure I take yer meaning," Frank said.

"That's okay," Leo said. "Don't worry about it."

[62] After

Leo moved deeper into the store, shining the light as he went. He felt weird, but lately that was normal. This was the first commercial place he'd been in that wasn't open when everyone disappeared. It was closed up, and felt like it. Leo felt like he wasn't supposed to be there. As he moved down the main aisle, back toward the plumbing supplies to find his hose, he couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen. He chuckled at the idea of getting arrested for breaking and entering, or robbery. Maybe that cop from the car outside would catch him. Ha, ha.

He found the plumbing section and spent a few minutes looking until he found big reels of plastic tubing. Leo's father had told him that most new houses used flexible plastic tubing like this now, since copper was so expensive. He cut a five foot section from a reel with his pocketknife and looped the tubing around his arm. Briefly he considered getting another flashlight, but decided against it. It was time to get the hell out of this place.

Back in the parking lot outside, Leo opened the gas caps on both of the vehicles. Under both of the caps was a silver piece covering the hole to the fuel tank. When Leo

pushed the hose through the hole, the metal piece moved to the side, allowing him access.

He thought about siphoning. He wasn't really sure how siphoning worked. He needed to suck the gas from the cop car into the tank of the Jeep. In movies some clever hero always just stuck one tube in and sucked on the end. He was pretty sure that gas was poisonous, though - that's why he'd gotten a clear tube, so he could watch the gas and make sure he didn't get it in his mouth.

He pushed the end of the tube down through the metal retaining barrier and into the gas tank of the cop car until it wouldn't go any further. If he pushed the tube in anymore he could just feel it coiling around itself inside the tank. It was in. He knew he'd have to move fast once the gas was flowing, so he practiced shoving the other end of the tube into the tank of the Jeep, until he could do it fast.

Leo took a deep breath and sucked hard on the end of the tube. He saw gas move up into the tube from the tank on the cop car, and felt a sudden rush in his head. He dropped the end of the tube on the ground and almost passed out from the gas fumes. Gas spilled out of the tube onto the ground. He moved quickly to shove the end of the tube into the tank of the Jeep, but he'd lost a lot of gas on the

cement. Once he had the end of the tube in the tank on the Jeep, the gas stopped flowing.

[63] Arizona

"I figured out later that I didn't need to suck that hard on the end of the tube to get the gas flowing. All I needed to do was make sure that the tube was coming from the other tank was higher than the other end of the tube. Once I put the loose end in the Jeep, the gas stopped moving because the tank on the Jeep was higher than the tank on the cop car. Once I figured that out, I went back inside the store again, even though I didn't want to, and got a plastic gas can and a funnel. I put the gas can on the ground and siphoned from the cop car into the gas can, then filled up the tank on the Jeep with the can and the funnel. It wasn't pretty, it took longer, but it worked," Leo said.

[64] After

Leo had to siphon from three other cars to fill up the tank on the Jeep completely. He felt woozy and lightheaded from sucking all the fumes, but didn't get any gas in his mouth. He stowed the tube, can, and funnel in the back of the Jeep, proud that he figured out a way to get gas.

He still needed food and camping gear. He spent the next several hours in a sporting good store and a grocery store, reenacting what he'd already done in the home improvement place. It was still jarring, but after the first time he was a little more used to breaking in and taking what he needed. He tried his best to keep his mind off the weirdness, doing his best to treat it like normal shopping. He couldn't, not completely, but it helped.

At midday the Jeep was packed with canned food, a small gas cookstove, a tent, a sleeping bag, clothes, supplies, his siphon kit, a lantern, and anything else he could think of. He was ready to leave town.

[65] Arizona

"To be honest, Frank, I'm not really sure why I spent so much time preparing. I could have easily made it to the next city without taking all that time to gather all that gear. I think that somewhere inside me I knew that I wasn't going to find anything in the next town either. Or the town after that. Something inside me knew it was going to be a long road and I wanted to be ready for it. I can't really tell you what that thing was, but it was there," Leo said.

"I think I can wager a guess," Frank replied.

Leo went on as if Frank hadn't spoken, "Not only that, but all that gear collection calmed me down some. I was still scared, still pretty angry and messed up, but it felt good to be actually doing something after those three days right after it happened, when I was just wandering around. It felt like work, like a purpose. It made me feel ready. I needed to feel ready. It kept me going over the long months after that."

[66] Arizona

Frank and Leo trekked on along the side of the highway toward town. The sun blazed overhead like a blast furnace, and Leo was dismayed to find out that the four bottles of water he'd brought in his backpack were already gone. He and Frank had already gone through two each.

The sweat was pouring off of them. The sun reflected off the sand, shining through Leo's sunglasses as if they weren't even there. Frank seemed unfazed.

"Man, it's hot," Leo said.

"Ayhuh. Best we find someplace to stop until evening. It probably ain't safe to keep under the sun, a hot day like this."

Leo looked around at the desert. All he saw was dead brush. There wasn't even a rock to make any shade. "Not many places around here," he said.

"There's a rest stop up about a mile if I remember right," Frank said. "Should be able to find some shade there. Should be water, too. We'll stop and wait it out."

"How much further is it to town?" Leo wished he'd paid more attention on the trips into town before the Jeep broke.

"It's still a piece," Frank said. "Ain't no point killin ourselves to try to make the whole stretch in this heat."

"Alright."

[67] After

Three days after everyone disappeared, it was finally time to leave. Leo steered the fully stocked Jeep toward the highway. He wanted to drive by his apartment one final time, just to look at it, but the plane made his street impossible to drive down, so he moved on.

On the way to the highway he drove past the college where he'd been going to grad school. He would have finished his degree soon. That wasn't going to happen now. Nothing was going to happen now.

He didn't really know what to think. He savored the feelings in his mind, hoping that life might return to normal and he would finish his degree, live with Tamara again, everything thing would be fine once he found out what happened. He savored it because he knew it was unlikely. It melted in his mind like a piece of sugary candy and was gone, leaving an aspartame aftertaste behind.

The first few miles on the highway made him glad for the Jeep. He drove up to a wreck. Cars were piled up in a stack on the middle of the highway, turned sideways and backwards, smashed up against each other. Broken glass sparkled in the sunlight on the pavement. Leo steered the Jeep down into the grass median, moving slowly past the wreck. He looked into the windows as he drove by, but saw

nothing except empty seats, their seatbelts still clicked closed. He thought about stopping, but needed nothing. It was obvious that no one was there.

Back on the highway, he thought about where to go. The state capital was probably best. It was only a hundred miles south. He'd probably have the best luck finding someone there.

Leo drove for awhile. In between the gathered roadblocks of wrecked cars, camped out on the road like gypsy tents, the driving was the same as it'd been before everyone left. It was easy to space out and get lost in the movement of the yellow line separating the lanes of the highway. It clicked minutes by like a metronome.

The driving was slow. He spent most of his time maneuvering between wrecks, making little progress. He wasn't sure that he was going to make it down to the capital before tomorrow at this rate. The road was just too clustered. Sometimes he'd make it a mile, sometimes only a few hundred yards before he was steering the Jeep down into the median, or off to the side, spinning his tires in the wet mud of the corn fields that framed the highway.

After a while it became a mindless activity, and he found himself groping at the dials on the radio. Static on all the channels. Before everyone disappeared...he thought,

then paused. It was getting on his nerves to keep thinking that. Back before everyone disappeared. Over and over, always comparisons. He needed a better way to think about it. With no music to listen to, he had nothing but time to think.

[68] Before

When he was fourteen, Leo used to talk with his best friend David about how people think, about how their thoughts functioned up against each other. Arguing was their common pastime. The best conversation they had was on the railroad tracks that connected both their backyards, one summer afternoon. David always explained things to Leo. Sometimes Leo just kept him talking so that it got out.

They walked down the tracks from Leo's house to David's, kicking the purple rocks off the railroad mound and competing to see who could walk the track the longest without falling off.

"People use shortcuts for thoughts," David was saying. "It's like this, say that you have a guy who has a hatred of something, like cheese. He really hates cheese."

"Yeah, okay," Leo said, holding out his arms for balance on the rail.

"So he tells all his friends that he hates cheese so when he goes over to their houses' and eats with them they won't serve him cheese, right? But say that his good buddy Chuck, all Chuck ever cooks is food that has cheese in it, like lasagna, chili dip, pizza, some kinda eggplant food, I dunno, it all has cheese in it."

"Okay."

"So the cheesehater, let's call him Sam, Sam tells Chuck that he doesn't want to eat cheese because he hates it. At first Chuck understands and doesn't cook stuff with cheese in it anymore, but one day he forgets and cooks his eggplant food and it's covered with cheese. Sam explains that he won't eat it because he hates cheese, but it bothers Chuck."

Leo nods, half-listening and carefully putting one foot after the other.

"It bums Chuck out because even though he knows that Sam doesn't like cheese, he starts shortcutting his way of thinking about it. At first when he's gonna cook a meal he thinks about the cheese, but after awhile, and time is the key with this, it happens after awhile coz that's what people do, he just shortcuts Sam's dislike of cheese out of the equation and it just turns into Sam not liking anything Chuck cooks."

"So you mean that it turns from him thinking the whole thing out to just thinking about the end?"

"Exactly, I mean, this is a silly example, but that's what people have to do. Think about all the long explanations that people have for everything. If they really take the time to think it all through every time they need to make a choice based on those thought trains,

they wouldn't get anything done. They have to shortcut it sometimes, just to make action possible."

Leo fell off the rail. "Damn-it," he said. "Your turn. I got eighty-two steps."

"Okay. So, Chuck starts thinking that Sam hates his food since he stops thinking it through all the time he's going to make food. Eventually it just sticks in his mind that way and he forgets why Sam doesn't like it, because of the cheese. It gets shortcut," David said, stepping up onto the rail.

"So what happens then?"

"Chuck and Sam get pissed off at each other because they aren't going through the whole thought train, and then they stop being friends. Or they slow down and think about it and chill out, but that probably isn't going to happen."

"Yeah, but it's not really that big of a deal. It's just cheese. Why can't they just slow down?" Leo asked.

"Well, yeah, it's just cheese. But what if maybe it was something bigger, something that connected lots and lots of things together but the end result was the same? Like maybe Sam doesn't like cheese because his mom used to make mac and cheese for him when he was a kid and it was his favorite, but then his parents got divorced and his dad iced his mom because she left him? He's still pretty broken

up about it. So he doesn't tell Chuck all that, or he does, but Chuck doesn't want to think about Sam's dead ma every time he cooks - either way, it gets shortcut, either in Chuck or in Sam."

Leo kicked at a rock, "It still seems pretty farfetched."

"Maybe. But people are pretty farfetched, man. That's just the way it is. Even saying that is a shortcut. That's all any explanations are. Hell, even words are like that if you think about it," David said.

[69] After

On the highway driving to the state capital, Leo thought of that conversation with David when he was younger.

That was what he needed to do now - he needed a shortcut like that to think about what it was like before everyone disappeared and what it was like after, because it was getting to be too much to keep thinking that all the time. It was tearing him up, making it hard to think about anything the way that it was now. He couldn't come up with anything that was more than a euphemism, but he resolved to keep thinking about it. He had lots of time.

[70] After

Leo'd been thinking and driving for several hours. It was getting dark. He'd only made it seventy miles. It wasn't just the wrecks that were slowing him down, it was the space between the wrecks. In the gathering darkness, even with the headlights, he was afraid to speed up too much. He didn't want to hit anything. Between the wrecks and the slow speed, he wasn't making the time he wanted.

It was time to stop. Leo was beat. He toyed with the idea of setting up a full camp, the tent, a fire, and all that, but decided against it. He'd just sleep in the backseat of the Jeep.

A sign told him that there was a rest stop coming up in half a mile. He kept on going for that, determined to make it to the rest stop.

He pulled the Jeep off the road at the rest stop, parking between a semi trailer and a red pickup. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten all day, since the sandwich that morning. He used the flashlight to make a quick meal with his stove on the tailgate of the pickup and ate it.

After he ate he cleaned up his stove and took the pot and his flashlight toward the main building. He passed the dead vending machines, playing with the idea of cracking one open with his crowbar, and went inside.

He didn't look around the place much. Compared to all the deserted places he'd seen so far, the rest stop wasn't that shocking. Aside from the dead power, it looked normal. He used a urinal in the bathroom and laughed at himself, the first laugh in what felt like a long while, when he tried to use the sink to wash the pot. A little water came out, just what was in the pipe, but it was only a trickle. He guessed that the place must use an electric pump somewhere and it was dead.

Leo took his damp pot back to the Jeep. He lay down in the backseat, covering himself in his sleeping bag, a pillow from his apartment under his head. He was dead tired. It'd been a long day. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but couldn't get very deep.

He dozed for awhile, slipping in and out of the line between napping and true sleep. He tossed on the seat, throwing off his sleeping bag. His mouth tasted like he'd been sleeping, but he didn't feel like he had. It was too hot. His pillow smelled like Tamara.

He got up and got his flashlight. It was cooler outside the Jeep and he decided to take the top down. He found the clasps over the windshield and pulled the top off, unsnapping as he moved back. The Velcro came unattached. It sounded like he was tearing it open.

Once the top was off, Leo rolled it up and put it in the space between the front and back seats. He lay back down on the backseat, pulling the sleeping bag over him again. The late spring air was cooler with the top off the Jeep. He felt much more comfortable. He took a big sniff of his pillow, pulling in the scent of Tamara's perfume, and watched the sky.

The stars were bright above his makeshift bed, brighter than he'd ever seen them. Even camping up in northern Maine with his father, he'd never seen stars so bright. All the light pollution was gone. It wasn't just that the stars themselves were brighter, he'd never seen so many.

He fell asleep thinking of his father and trying to make up names for all the constellations he'd never seen before.

[71] After

In the back of the Jeep, Leo woke up just as the grey light was cresting the horizon. His sleeping bag was covered with dew. He made himself a cup of coffee with his stove and looked at the Jeep. It looked good with the top down. He decided to leave it that way. After packing up his things, Leo drove back out to the road, eager to watch the sunrise and get moving again.

[72] Arizona

A hawk screamed over Frank and Leo, a third participant in the road, in the story. Frank said that the rest stop wasn't much further. Leo nodded and kept telling.

"That first night away from my place was rough, Frank. I had a hard time getting to sleep. I just kept thinking of all the people I knew, Tamara, my father, wondering if I was ever gonna see them again," Leo said.

"It wasn't all bad, though. I liked being on the road. I liked waking up in the mornings and making coffee and driving. Every day, I didn't know what I was going to find. I had no idea, really. I saw some really beautiful things from the Jeep. Once I got to the capital and it was empty too, that was pretty rough.

I started taking smaller roads. The larger highways had more wrecks on them, they were filled with destroyed cars - the smaller roads had less. It made for faster going. It wasn't just that, though. The country was better. And without all the cars on the roads, I saw animals all the time, especially in the mornings. Deer, raccoons, birds, all kinds of wildlife that I hadn't really taken the time to look at before."

"I got to kind of need the road, need the traveling. It got to the point where I didn't like stopping at all

unless I needed to. I felt itchy if I stayed in one place. Finding people was what all the traveling was really about, that was always in the back of my mind, but the traveling turned into its own thing, too. Ff I kept moving I didn't have to think about what had happened, everyone disappearing. I never found another good way to say that, either. I just stopped saying it for awhile and just traveled around, that was kinda my shortcut. As long as I kept moving, I was okay. I thought about a lot of things, but I didn't get so crazed up about it."

Frank looked into the distance, squinting under his hand, scanning the horizon. "Sometimes," he said, "movin' is what a man needs."

"Yeah," Leo said. "I guess it's like that."

[72] After

Leo didn't find anyone in the state capital. He didn't find anyone in any of the smaller towns in the state either. His mother's house was empty, too.

He learned, after a time, to stop raising his hopes every time he pulled into a new place. He'd just drive slowly through towns, checking the major places, shouting for people, finding no one.

After the first few towns he got the idea that he should leave messages, in case anyone else was doing the same thing as him. He'd take a king-size bed sheet, spray-paint it with a message, and leave it nailed up on grocery stores or town halls. The message always depended on his mood, sometimes it was dark, sometimes questioning, sometimes it was the kind of thing he would call "glass-half full shit" in previous conversations with Tamara. He almost always left one, though. He knew wasn't really necessary, no one was going to find him later because of it, but he did it anyway.

He spent months traveling around like that. He checked towns, left messages, moved on. He spent most of his time on the road in between towns - that was the way he liked it. Most of his days were taken up with the business of traveling and staying alive, scavenging food from empty

grocery stores, driving, sleeping. He liked to pass the time keeping himself busy.

He did have time to think, while he was driving, or at night, before he dropped off to sleep, and he found himself thinking about his life, before everyone disappeared. He thought about the people that had made his life great, and all the things that had made it horrible. He spent a long time trying to figure it all out - not only why everyone had disappeared, but about what he loved and what he hated. Figuring out things like that, examining them, digging into them, was something that Leo never had time for before. Now he had all the time in the world, and the thinking became as much as a labor as driving and searching.

In that way, it was bittersweet.

[73] Arizona

Finally, after hours of walking in the heat, Leo saw the rest stop. It appeared as a small building hunkered down by the edge of the highway. He pointed it out to Frank.

"Ayhuh," Frank said. "I saw it a few minutes ago."

The stop was still some distance away in the flat terrain, but the sight of it made Leo feel better. He was worried that they were out of water since it was barely early afternoon.

Up at the rest stop Leo and Frank found a drink machine and broke it open with the crowbar.

"Good thing I brought this along," Leo said. He cracked open a bottle of water and drank.

"We best go inside until it gets dark," Frank said. "Get into some shade."

Inside the rest stop Leo and Frank sat down on the tile. It was a standard rest stop building, just a few vending machines and a pair of bathrooms, but it had shade and that's what was important. It was still hot inside, but after a few smashed windows, a slight breeze was enough to make it better than the direct sun.

They relaxed to wait until nightfall. Leo continued the telling.

[74] Maine

He'd been on the road for months. He'd searched from his initial town in the Midwest, through towns in Illinois and Indiana, then wandered down to Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. He moved up through eastern Pennsylvania, then upper state New York, on his way to Maine. His father and stepmother lived in Maine, and he wanted to check their house. He hoped to be there in a few days.

Leo was blinking heavy and decided he needed to pull off the road. The gas gauge was running low anyway. He'd need to siphon again soon, but didn't feel like it that night. He'd do it again in the morning, but before that he needed some rest.

Leo drove over the rise as the shadows licked the trees like stray black cat cleaning herself after a big meal. The pines in southern Maine lined the small two lane highway, a dark asphalt road with fading yellow lines. Up the road to the West, Leo saw a squat, gray building growing in the distance. As he drove closer, he saw a white sign with unlit neon letters that read *Pineside*. It was a motel.

He pulled off the road. It was as good a place to stop as any. The gray building was sided with old wooden siding - it looked loose and ready to fall off in a few places.

The building was two stories, its East side lined with numbered room doors that opened from the sidewalk on the lower level and the walkway on the upper level. A few cars sat dead, in the parking lot. The place looked like it'd been pretty run down even before everyone disappeared.

Leo drove up to the end of the building and parked the Jeep opposite an old white minivan so he could siphon in the morning. He lined up the gas caps, then put the Jeep in park. He grabbed his pack, leaving the Jeep unlocked, and got out onto the pavement.

It was almost dark now. The sun left a bright corona of fading oranges as it sank down behind the Maine pine trees. There was a slight breeze that ruffled their needles, but the temperature was still pretty hot for in late June in Maine. Leo adjusted the straps on his pack and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his free hand.

He walked into the office on the corner of the building, pulling open the glass door with a jerk. It seemed to be contemplating sticking, but then glided open on its metal hinges. He pulled his flashlight, the same beat-up black maglight he'd taken from that cop car and clicked it on, scanning the room with the beam.

A desk sat on moldy carpeting. A dusty looking computer screen reflected the light of the beam back to

him, shining it into his eyes. He dropped the beam to the floor to approach the desk. The desk drawers were locked, but he imagined the rooms would be, too, and Leo needed keys.

He pulled the black crowbar from his pack and set the flashlight down on the desk, trying to aim it as best he could to get some light to work by. After months of jimmying things open, he worked quick and fast, cracking open the wooden desk drawers after only few quick jerks of his arm. He'd learned that cracking things open with the crowbar wasn't so much about strength or how hard you pushed down on the thing, it was about getting the tip of the bar in the right place, right by the lock. With wood, all you had to do was crack the part that held the metal lock in place. Same thing with house doors, all you had to do was crack out the jamb. Lock wasn't worth anything if it wasn't connected to the rest of the thing.

In the third drawer he cracked open Leo found a tray of keys in a tray that looked like it was supposed to hold silverware. The forks were marked "Suites", the spoons, "Economy." The knives were empty. He grabbed a handful of keys from each pile, stuffing them into his front pockets. He collected his pack, light, and crowbar before leaving the office and going out into the night.

As he walked up the stairs to the second floor because he felt like staying up a little higher, Leo wondered why he always bothered with keys when he stayed at a place like this. He didn't bother when he staying in nicer places, the kind of places with the card reader locks. Those kind of places needed power to work the locks, so you just had to crack them open if you felt like staying in a clean bed. But whenever he stopped at one of these old motels, like something out of a 1970's horror movie, all old and run down, he always got the keys from the manager's office instead of just cracking the rooms open.

He wasn't really sure why he did it, but he guessed that it made things just feel a little more normal. Even when he was in his room, reading by candlelight, with the window open because there was no air conditioning, he liked to do anything he could to make it feel as normal as possible. Having a key in his pocket and an unbroken door he could lock helped with that sense of normalcy, even if the open windows and flashlight did nothing for it.

One Leo got up the steps on the end of the walkway, one hand holding the flashlight, the other trailing along the white metal railing, he stopped and pulled a handful of keys out of his pocket. The keys were metal, all attached to red tags with a room number on one side and the name of

the motel on the other. He walked slowly down the walkway, sifting through the keys and trying to find one that matched a room number. He found one, halfway down.

Leo slipped the key into the knob and opened the red door, marked with the number nineteen in tarnished gold numbers. He scanned the inside of the room with his flashlight. It was a small room, one of the "Economy" ones - a twin bed sat in the middle, against the wall, opposite a TV on a dresser. A night table with a useless lamp sat next to the bed, and in the corner was a door that led to the bathroom. Leo checked the toilet. No water.

It wasn't a bad room. It was hot in there, though, and the thin cloud of dust that rose up when he through his pack on the bed made him sneeze. He set down his flashlight and pulled out his candles.

A few minutes later he was laying on the bed, trying to settle in. He'd lit two candles, shut the door, and pulled the coverlet off the bed, kicking up even more dust. Reclined on the white sheets, squinting at an old copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* he'd found at a library in a small town in Kentucky, Leo was sweating like crazy. The only air movement in the room was the rising air above the candles - it felt hot and stuffy. The dust

settled down on to his sweat, sticking to it and giving his skin a sickly grayish sheen.

Leo got up off the bed, moving across the room and pulling back the curtains, intending to open a window. He grabbed at the edges of the frame, but it didn't look like these windows could be opened. Some luck, that. He sighed.

He didn't really want to break a window. Later, with Frank, we would do that more often, but that was later. This wasn't his place - even with everyone gone he still felt like he should respect some things. And even though it didn't really matter - he'd already jimmied open the desk, breaking a window would kill the sense of normalcy he sought in old motels like that. It was just that usually he could open a window.

He thought about opening the door. Maybe he could just leave it open all night, keep some air moving. But Leo didn't really want to do that either. Ever since he was a kid, he hated sleeping in rooms with open doors. He always used to close his bedroom and closet doors before he felt comfortable enough to sleep, and this hadn't really changed since everyone disappeared.

He didn't really mind sleeping out in the open, but if he was in a room with a door in it, and all rooms had doors, the door had to be closed so he could sleep right.

In fact, it may have even been worse since everyone disappeared. It was easier to imagine things were normal if he was enclosed in a space that was only meant to hold one person, like this small motel room. That seemed to make some sense. It was being out in the middle of everything, in places made for thousands of people, that eerie. Leo kind of liked the feeling of being behind a closed door. It made it easier to forget all the space that held him, just him alone.

Leo walked away from the window and sneezed.

"Bless me," he said, then sat down on the bed, groping in his pocket for a cigarette. He had the white stick in his mouth and was drawing the lit lighter up to his mouth to light it when he noticed the small plastic sign on the night table. *Thank you for not smoking in this room.*

Leo laughed out loud, but put down his cigarette. The whole thing was absurd. It was roasting in here, and he didn't really want to smoke anyway. It was a little more than that, though, something about the place, and the normalcy.

"Forget it," he said to the blank television, which reflected the light of the candles. "But I don't really wanna sleep in the Jeep." He thought about it. He didn't really want to sleep on the ground either.

He thought for a minute more, fidgeting with the loose cigarette and lighter. The sign was probably a good idea anyway, as stuffy as it was in here, he'd listen to it. He pulled open the drawer of the nightstand, looking for the Bible. It was there. He shut the drawer again with a thud. He sighed again.

It was nice enough to sleep outside, but he didn't want to sleep on the ground. He thought he had another way to figure this out. When he was young sometimes his Pépère used to let him sleep outside at camp, in a rope hammock stretched between two trees. Most comfortable way to sleep he'd ever tried. He didn't have a hammock and trees right here in the room, but he had a few things that he might be able to sub-in.

He stripped the top sheet off the bed and went outside. It took him about five minutes to rig up a way to tie the sheet between the railing and a solid light fixture without wasting too much of the sheet with the knots. Once he was satisfied, jounced the hammock, then tentatively lowered himself down in, to see if it would hold his weight.

He almost flipped the thing over as he was first getting into it, but the knots seemed to hold. They tightened around the light fixture and the railing, but did

not come loose. Leo rocked the hammock a few times with his foot against the rail to test it. A good hammock just wasn't right unless it could rock. The knots seemed fine.

After collecting his stuff from the room, along with a pillow from the bed, Leo settled into the hammock again. There was no overhang over the upper walkway, so as Leo relaxed back into the hammock, the pillow under his head, rocking comfortably, he could see the first stars begin to pop into existence over him. The breeze swam underneath him, keeping him cool, yet wrapped in the delicate warmth of the hammock.

He'd forgotten how wonderful hammocks were.

[75] Before

Leo first learned about hammocks when he was six, on a hunting trip with his father and Pèpère. They were hunting partridge and staying at Pèpère's camp, a small cabin on a lake in Northern Maine. There was no electricity, only gas for the lights and the cookstove, but running water came to the facets from a pipe in a nearby spring.

It was cozy inside, with bunk beds and a cast iron stove for heat. The outhouse out back had the signature crescent moon shape cut into the door. Pèpère's hammock hung between two trees near a large old stump. It was a beautiful place in the woods, right on the water, with few neighbors - the only way to get to the camp was either by ATV through the woods or across the lake on a boat. They'd taken the boat, a small fisher with a 15 horsepower outboard.

Leo liked going up to camp to stay with Pèpère and Mamère. They were an old French couple - they only spoke English to their grandkids.

Pèpère was a big bull of a man, the hair on his head and face was still jet black, with only a little grey starting to come in at the sides. Leo liked to be around Pèpère, but he didn't like to get too close - Pèpère rarely showered up at camp and he always smelled like sweat. His

breath labored out of his old, big nose like he was always having trouble breathing.

Mamère looked much older than Pèpère, even though she was younger. Her diabetes had aged her faster, turning her hair white and her skin soft and crinkly, like yellowed silk. The skin on her fingers was tough, from testing her blood every day with needles. Her eyes were blue, the same color as Leo's - she was where the blue came from, blue like the sky on the edge of the sea.

Leo didn't go hunting with his Dad and Pèpère during the day up at camp. He was young and wasn't really interested in getting up at four-thirty AM. He'd stayed at camp with Mamère, who was happy to have the company - normally she read while Pèpère was hunting, fishing, or looking for mushrooms when they were up camp. The day Leo learned about hammocks he'd spent the day listening to Mamère's stories about his father when he was his age, eating her white and pink chalky peppermints from her glass peppermint jar, getting soaked in the nearby stream looking for arrowheads, and eating the meatballs from his spaghetti O's at lunch.

He liked hearing the stories the best. He would sit by Mamère at the table under the big front window, looking out over the water of the lake and listen as she told him about

the trouble his father used to get into with his friend Pete when they would come up to camp.

"Oh Leo," Mamère chuckled, patting his hand, "your daddy, he and his friend Petey used to sneak into the little garden at the Teebirge place down the trail and eat the strawberries while they were still green.

Mrs. Teebirge used to come to visit with me when her husband was out and she would tell me about her garden - she couldn't figure out why she never got any red strawberries. Oh, mon Dieu, when she caught them one day she nearly tanned their little hides." She laughed.

"Pépère made your daddy go work for her, helping her weed her garden for the rest of the summer until every strawberry in that garden turned red. Oh, how he hated it, he used to complain and complain, my God, but he was afraid of getting his hide tanned by Pépère, so he went, every single day."

She laughed again, then turned a little wistful. "Your daddy was a little hellraiser, even when he was your age. Not like you, you're a good little boy." She threw up one hands, shaking it next to her head. "Oh, he gave me such headaches."

Leo grinned at her, sucking on a pink peppermint and imagining it was a sour green strawberry.

His father and Pèpère came back to camp in the early afternoon, roaring up on the back of a huge old three-wheeler. They had their shotguns strapped to the back and three partridges in the bucket on the front. Leo kissed Mamère on the cheek and ran out of the camp, the screen door flapping behind him.

Pèpère took the birds from the bucket as Leo's father ruffled his hair.

"Didn't get many, Son," his father said as though Leo had asked. "It rained a little this morning and most of them stayed bedded down."

Leo looked at the brown and white birds. Their heads hung at funny angles on their necks, drooping down enough to touch the black tips of their tail feathers. He asked why the birds looked funny like that.

Pèpère answered him. "Well, the birds only catch a little BB from the birdshot," he explained. "It's not enough to finish them. You have to break their necks."

He carried the birds over to a large stump over by the hammock strung between two trees. He took his knife from his belt and stuck it into the stump, then spread the three birds out on the stump, side by side.

Leo looked at the birds again. They lay on the wood, their eyes closed, their necks twisted. Leo thought that

they would be sore when they woke up - his neck was always sore when he slept on it funny like that.

"Why don't you come on over here, Leo," Pèpère said.
"I'll teach you how to gut a bird."

Leo walked toward the hammock and the stump. He tugged the sleeves of his favorite white sweatshirt, the one with the dinosaur on it, down over his hands as he walked.

"I dunno that's such a good idea. He's a little young. If his mother finds out you let him see that she'll be pissed," Leo's father said, walking up to the stump.

Pèpère waved him off. "Nah, he'll be fine. If she has a problem with it I'll talk to her. Boy's gotta learn sometime," he said. "Come on, Leo. Hop on up here." Pèpère pointed at the hammock.

That was enough for Leo. Getting to sit in Pèpère's hammock was a treat. Pèpère usually yelled at him when he got in it since he liked to rock it like a swing and Pèpère was afraid that he was going to break it, or loosen the knots and pull it off the trees. Leo hopped up into the rope hammock and looked down at the birds on the stump. He swung his legs, making the hammock swing, but not too much so Pèpère didn't yell at him.

"You see, Leo, you have to clean off the feathers so you can get to the meat inside. Partridge makes for great

eatin. Best way to clean off the feathers is just to open her up."

Leo watched, first in fascination, and then with growing horror as Pèpère stepped up onto the stump, pushing two of the birds aside and laying the third out, its wings spread flat against the wood. The black tips of the wings matched Pèpère's boots as Pèpère placed a boot on each wing, on either side of the bird's body. Leo heard the small bones in the wing crunch under Pèpère's big boots. After he was positioned, Pèpère took one of the bird's legs in each hand and pulled.

The two halves of the bird separated, the upper half with the wings stayed on the stump under Pèpère's boots, the lower half came away easily in his hands. Steaming guts dumped out on the wood, brown and red lumps pouring out of the bird's body. Blood pooled on the mangled feathers, which clung to the stump, glued by the sticky fluid. Leo could hear songbirds twittering in the trees.

Pèpère stepped off the wings and tossed them aside, then pulled his knife out of the stump and cut the feet of the bird, sawing through them in a few quick slices. He brandished the carcass at Leo. It no longer looked like a sleeping bird. Leo stopped swinging and shrunk back into the hammock.

"There, ya see? Mamère will clean the rest of the bird inside, but it's important to get the guts out before they spoil the meat."

He let the remains of the bird drop back to the bloody stump. "Yep. We'll eat good tonight."

Pépère spread out the next bird on the stump. "Now watch this. You're going to need to learn how to clean your own birds someday so you can go hunting with me and your old man."

But Leo had had enough. His six-year-old eyes didn't want to see any more. He curled up in the hammock and kicked his feet out, rocking it and closing his eyes. He didn't want to see anymore, but was afraid that Pépère would yell at him if he went back inside with Mamère.

Those birds weren't sleeping. They were dead. His father and Pépère killed them. Leo squeezed his eyes shut as tight as he could and rocked in the hammock, trying to ignore the wet hacking sounds of Pépère's knife on the stump. He tried to listen for the songbirds he'd heard earlier, but he couldn't hear them anymore. He thought that maybe they had all been scared away.

Leo stayed curled up in the hammock until Mamère called him in for supper. He asked if he could eat the rest of his spaghetti O's. He didn't want to eat the dead birds.

[75] Maine

Leo swung the makeshift hammock back and forth with his foot, pushing off the metal railing. The stars above him were bright and gleaming now, he guessed that he must have dozed off a little. The thing about hammocks was that you could doze off in them without even knowing it, they were so comfortable.

It was getting a little colder out now so Leo reached down to his pack on the cement walkway and pulled out his jacket. He spread it over his torso and arms. He could hear the breeze rustling the pine needles in the trees. The light from the stars was enough that he could make out the dark outlines of the pines across the road, a dark zigzag of triangles against the lighter black of the sky.

Leo fished the smoke and lighter from his pocket and pulled one of his arms out from under his leather jacket to smoke it. He was glad that he'd decided not to smoke in the room, though he couldn't really figure out why.

Smoking was better outside anyway. Leo lit the cigarette and lay back in the hammock, rocking it and smoking. The slight breeze carried the smoke off in the night.

[76] Maine

Leo cracked his eyes open. The morning sun invaded his retina's, coming up in full force and threatening to establish a beachhead. That was the one problem with sleeping outside in a hammock, you couldn't sleep in. He groaned. He didn't feel like he'd gotten enough sleep, but he felt pretty well rested nonetheless.

The sky was an early morning blue, with white swaths of clouds creeping at the edges. It might rain, later in the day. He supposed he should get up, scrounge some breakfast, and get started on the siphoning. He was getting pretty good at it, but it still took him awhile.

Time to get up and get back on the road, to face another day alone, with only his thoughts, his memories, to keep him company. Maybe, though, he thought, as he pulled his body up from the swinging hammock, it would be a nice day.

[77] Arizona

Leo and Frank waited in the rest stop until the sun was beginning to down on the edge of the horizon. With his backpack stocked with water from the cracked open vending machine, Leo and Frank set out toward town again.

The sun sank low in the West. It was still hot, but bearable. Stars began to peek out on the Eastern edge of the sky. A cascade of colors filled the sky, the oranges and reds behind them, blending into blues and deep purples in front.

It was still a decent trek to town, but resupplied and rested, Frank and Leo walked on, thankful for the dying heat.

[78] Maine

Leo finished siphoning from the cars in the motel parking lot and packed the Jeep. With any luck, he'd been at his parent's house by evening. Driving in Maine was easier than some of the southern states - there hadn't been as many cars on the road when everyone disappeared. It made driving more like it was before. He didn't need to leave the road as much.

The pines moved past the Jeep on the edge of the road, standing like soldiers flanking a monarch. That's the way Leo felt sometimes, on the good days. Like king of the world.

He popped in the CD of a singer songwriter that Tamara liked. The woman was her favorite. It helped to listen to things that reminded him of her, on the bad days and the good days. Today was a good day, in comparison. He was had food in his belly, a decent night's sleep, and was looking forward to seeing his parents' home, his real home.

[79] Maine

Leo pulled a new CD from the black case and slipped it into the player. Even after months on the road, he sometimes forgot how prevalent radio was, and how hard it was to get used to it not being there. Sometimes when he was driving he liked to just steer the streets in quiet, even before everyone disappeared.

Having a radio, switching it on, it was so easy to suddenly feel connected to some DJ prattling away in a distant soundbooth and feel like you were sharing something with them. Now, with all the airwaves clear, the only way he could feel like that was with music. It was a shame that so much of it was crap, not really worth more than one listen. He'd rather listen to crap right now, though, some sappy stuff with acoustic guitars and a guy with a crooning voice.

He was almost to his parents' house and hoped that some music would chill him out a little. He didn't know what it was going to be like once he got to his parents'. It might be real rough.

But he wasn't ready yet to stop thinking. He still had some things he needed to varnish over, to keep new, but covered a little so that they didn't splinter him up so much.

Leo took one hand of the wheel, glanced down to the center console, and pushed play.

[80] Maine

Leo heaved a deep breath and turned left onto Pond Road A. He was about six miles from his parents' house. He hadn't been here in a long time, a few years at least. It was hard, with his parents divorced, his Mom living in the Midwest, his father and stepmom living out here in Maine.

Pines and maples passed by on the roadside. The Jeep's tires ate asphalt. Not many cars anymore to detour around. He was almost there.

He needed to lock up his mind, and right quick so he could take it. He was almost there.

[81] Arizona

Frank and Leo walked on through the darkness. The wind had died down - aside from the sound of Leo's voice and the crunch of their boots on the roadside - there was silence.

The landscape was all stars and black. There was no moon. Shadowy shapes - rocks, cacti, brush. Just the two men on the road, walking slowly, one blind, one less.

Frank led the way, Leo following.

[82] Maine

A final left and Leo was steering the Jeep down his parents' long dirt driveway. The gravel under his tires felt rocky and unstable. The few months since everyone had disappeared weren't kind to the road. That told him a little. His father wasn't around to maintain the driveway. He never would have let it get this bad.

Down the first hill, Leo passed the familiar sights. The fort he'd built with his brothers when he was younger was barely noticeable through the trees on his right. The floor had fallen in. All that was left was a rotting frame.

He passed the clearing with the blue tarpaulin tent that held the boat during the winter. The plastic had fallen off its cheap wooden frame. The shape of the boat on its trailer was outlined in blue.

Around the first bend Leo hit a bad hole in the gravel driveway. It threatened to pull him down in the clearing with the artesian well spigot. He backed up and realigned the Jeep, pushing it slightly into the pine-needle floor to get around the hole. The washout looked pretty bad. Spring rains usually made Leo's father order a new truckload of sand to fill holes like this. Here, in the middle of the Maine woods, it was easy to see how quickly nature would reclaim land barely wrested from her grasp.

Even the driveway itself, the parts not washed out, were full of grass and weeds.

Around the final turn, Leo saw the house, framed by the lake in the background. It was a tall red California saltbox style, stolen from the time Leo's father spent in California before he came back to Maine to get married and build a family. The house was unwieldy, with high ceilings.

Leo pulled up the Jeep at the bottom of the driveway. The driveway seemed shorter than it usually was. He remembered the first time he'd driven down it. It hadn't been a Jeep, then. It was a bike. He couldn't learn how to keep balanced on the sandy soil with training wheels that rocked back and forth. His father took him to the top of the driveway, removed Leo's training wheels with a wrench from his pocket, sat Leo on the bike, and pushed him over.

It scared the hell out of him, but Leo stayed balanced, speeding down the driveway, his inertia keeping him up. That was the first time Leo drove down this driveway.

[83] Maine

Now he'd just been down the driveway again, maybe for the last time. Leo got out of the Jeep. The house loomed over him. Tarpaper was still tacked to the walls under the overhang. His father was never finished with the house. Now it looked like he never would.

Leo thought about finishing the house, standing there in the driveway in front of it. He could stay here and do that, finish what his father couldn't. He knew enough, had watched his father do enough to give it a try. He could finish siding the tarpaper, put slate floors in the kitchen, finishing trimming the windows that his father never had. He thought about it. Not now. Maybe someday, depending on how long he had.

Maybe that's what his father used to say, too.

Leo walked up the porch steps and stood on the front deck. The familiar green door stood before him, its paint as vibrant as it had been when he was a child. He put his hand on the rounded silver knob.

It hit him then, the enormity of it. It stood before him like the huge house his father built with his own two hands to house his family, the house Leo'd lived in until his seventh birthday. Until he'd gotten here, seen the washed out, weedy driveway, he'd kept a hope, somewhere

back and buried in a place he tried not to think about. It was true, then. His father was gone.

He'd known it was probably true. When he stopped by his mother's house in the Midwest and found it empty, he'd been sure then, whatever this was, if it was connected to him, it wasn't connected by blood, that he knew. But still.

Leo tried the door. It was unlocked. Of course it would be.

Old shoes lay in a dusty pile next to the mat. Leo entered, standing on the landing. He chose to go up into the living room. The ceiling was high above him. His eyes tracked the brown-stained beams supporting the cross-paneled roof.

On the main floor Leo looked around. It was like he remembered. The living room to his right, the kitchen to his left, door to the back porch in front of him, all laid out on a huge floor without any boundaries between them. The stair to the loft was in the living room. Leo noticed that his father had carpeted the stairs. That was new. He was sure if his father were here now he'd be telling Leo about all the little improvements he'd made since last time he was here. He loved to talk about those kinds of things - he was so proud of his work.

Leo walked over to the living room area, tracking muddy footprints in the dust with his wet shoes. His stepmom would be livid. She used to make Leo clean the house all the time, for even a spec of dust. It was her favorite punishment.

The fireplace was half-done now. A small pile of slate sat next to the hearth. It was built up halfway up the wall. Leo traced a finger over the slate, confirming it was real. All these new things, they didn't seem real to Leo without his father there to tell how long it had taken, how he'd figured out some ingenious way to do it with hardly no labor, and how much Leo's stepmom had paid him to finally finish it.

It was empty without him.

[84] Maine

That wasn't all. The mantel above the fireplace was stained brown now. Last time Leo'd been here it was dry wood. On the mantel were the same photographs that'd been there as long as Leo could remember. He stared at their uniform silver frames, like packaged memories.

His father and stepmom on their wedding day, staring into each others' eyes, his stepmom with ridiculous permed hair as big as her head, his Dad with a silly mustache.

Leo and his brothers standing in front of the lake, down by the water, each of them holding a newly caught bass on a string.

A circle of family portraits in a single frame, some school pictures, some taken by a professional photographer Leo's stepmom hired - his brother, his stepbrother, his sister, himself.

Mamère and Pèpère in front of their camp.

His brother and sister, small and goofy-looking on the fence behind Mamère and Pèpère's house, standing next to their father. That was the day before they left Maine, after the divorce. Leo looked at himself in that picture, small and blonde, with blue eyes. He was grinning stupidly, wearing his white sweatshirt with the dinosaur on it. He didn't know that later in the afternoon they would be

boarding a plane. People don't tell children those kinds of things, schedule things. His father had told him about the divorce, of course, but Leo didn't understand all the details. He didn't know what it would really mean.

[85] Before

A chilly breeze from the north ruffled the trees. They were painted with all the colors of the Autumn rainbow. Leo's father took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled slowly. Sitting high on the wooden porch next to him, Leo savored the smell of his father - soap mixed with Old Spice. Leo was seven.

"Your mother and I..." his father started, screwing up his face, as if trying to find the right words. Concise speech wasn't his strongpoint. His voice fumbled over beginnings a few more times before settling on the words that were close to what he wanted to say. "Well, your mother's divorcing me."

The cold breeze slipped between Leo's ribs as if he wasn't huddled under three layers of clothing. He didn't exactly know what that word meant, but it loomed out of his father's words, taunting him with a terrible sort of expectancy.

As if sensing Leo's fear and confusion, his father continued. "She's taking you and your brother and sister and moving to the Midwest to live with her mother."

Leo's father sighed, then set about answering the unasked questions that lay on Leo's frozen tongue. "We've been talking to a lawyer and everything, it looks like you

will be able to come back to stay with me over the summers, but you'll go to school out there."

At last Leo's voice melted and his tongue came unstuck from the top of his mouth. He squeaked. "Why?"

"I dunno, Son, I dunno." His father's dark expression softened somehow and the area around his brown eyes turned fuzzy. "She says that I'm not home enough to be with her, you, your brother, and your sister - that I work too much. I've just been trying to build a house for us and I still gotta work to make money. Your mother...she doesn't understand."

Tears welled up in Leo's eyes and he sucked them back into his ducts by sheer force of will. "When?"

"Could be another two months or so before all the paperwork gets done, but I imagine you'll be flying out by the beginning of the summer."

Bolder now, Leo had found the contradiction. "I thought I could be with you during the summer!" He stood up and stamped his foot, crossed his arms, and stared down at his father.

"Not this summer, Son. Starts next summer."

That night Leo's father started sleeping in the spare bedroom downstairs. After that, he never really talked to Leo's Mom. He just ignored her when he passed her on the

landing, headed up to the kitchen to make a sandwich after stocking the furnace in the evenings.

His bedroom was right across the hall from Leo's. Leo would sneak in there every night after bed and sleep next to his father.

His Mom caught him one night. She'd been sitting on the stairs at the end of the hallway. Leo pretended she wasn't there. She chastised him and he ended up back in bed, fuming through tears.

Soon Leo's father moved out of the house altogether. He moved into an apartment across town and Leo was only able to see him every other weekend.

Later, as summer began, Leo, his mother, his brother, and his sister got on a plane for the Midwest. Leo's Dad gave him a plastic action figure, but told him not to open until he was on the plane. Leo hugged his father goodbye, clutching the wrapped package in one hand. The boarding call sounded and Leo's mother gathered up her children to lead them toward the ramp.

"Goodbye, Dad!" Leo yelled back at him. "Have a nice life!" He didn't really understand what that meant, how long time stretches out over so many miles, how distance transforms epoch to ages. He didn't understand what his

last comment would do to his father, or how long it would plague his mind.

It was that moment, walking down the ramp to the plane, that moment and all the years afterward, school years spent in the Midwest, summers spent in Maine, that moment that changed him - he would never have all the people he loved with him at the same time ever again. It was only this early grace that made his travels after everyone disappeared possible.

He coped. His whole life was coping. He was used to that, if nothing else.

[86] Maine

Leo looked at the last photograph on the mantel, a picture his stepmom had taken of him and his father. His father was sitting in an old red pickup truck with the driver's side door open, smoking a cigarette. Leo was leaning forward in the passenger seat, looking around him at the camera. Leo was fifteen, with long blond hair down to his chin. His father's eyes were scrunched up. His hair was already turning grey. It looked like he had a mouthful of smoke and was doing his best to keep it inside.

Leo heard the truth of it not long after that picture was taken.

[87] Before

He was working with his Dad that summer on a kitchen remodel, spending a summer in Maine that he'd rather have spent in the Midwest getting into trouble and looking for girls with his buddies. But he was having some trouble in school, getting into fights, ignoring his work, reading all the time. When his mother found dope in his room, she sent him to Maine to spend some time with his old man.

They were framing a new wall to hide the stove and countertop from the enlarged dining room. It was for one of his Dad's best customers, a regular.

First Leo's father gave Leo a sledgehammer to knock out the old wall, then they cut new 2x4's together and nailed them in place. They took a break so his father could smoke a cigarette.

"Dad, why'd you start smoking, anyway?" Leo asked, annoyed by the break. He was excited by the project and didn't want to stop.

"I dunno, Son," his father said, lighting up a smoke. "I had a lot of time on my hands, I guess. It was after your mother left me, I was in that apartment all alone most of the time, except every other weekend when you and your brother and sister came to stay, before your mother took

you out of the state. I just bought a pack of smokes one night, I'm not really sure why. I was drinking a lot then."

"Why?" Leo fiddled with two nails, fitting their heads against each other to create a single nail with a spike on both ends.

"I was pissed-off. My kids were just across town and I wasn't allowed to see you. I tried one night after you were asleep, but your mother wouldn't let me inside. She just called the cops and I had to leave when they showed up. I didn't have anything to do with my time. She said she left me because I wasn't around enough, but I was building something for us, working on the house. And just when I was ready to take a break, when I had all that extra time, she left me. She stayed in the house with you, the house I built with my own two hands, and I was living in that apartment. I didn't have anything to do, I guess." He exhaled a tired plume of smoke.

"What was it like?" Leo asked. He was aware, even at the time, how big a question that was, but wasn't sure how else to ask it.

Leo's father sighed. "It was tough. My old man raised me to have a stiff upper lip about things, but it was tough. I wasn't around for so many things that you've lived through, you or your brother and sister. It's a little

easier with you, you were a little older when it happened so you knew your Dad. But your sister, she was two. She never really had the time to get to know me like you did. I'm sure your mother's filled her head with all these lies about me. I can see it when I look at her, she doesn't really know who I am. That's the toughest part. She doesn't know my side of the story. She thinks that your asshole stepdad is her Dad. Another man. Not me. My own flesh and blood. She doesn't even know me."

Leo dropped the nails on the floor. He was getting to hear answers to questions that he'd been wondering about for years and wasn't sure exactly what to say.

"For that, I hated your mother. I wanted you kids to grow up here, with me, in Maine. When she told me she was leaving me..." His voice trailed off, evaporating like so much cigarette smoke.

"What, Dad?"

"I thought about killing her."

"Really?" Leo's eyes opened wide.

"Yeah. I got drunk one night and had it all planned out. I knew some real out of the way places, out on the land where I used to hunt - it's paper company land and I knew a few places where no one would ever find her. I had a

shovel, I could bury her deep in the woods. She would just disappear."

Leo stared at his father.

"When I got sober the next morning, I talked myself out of it. If I got caught, you kids would lose both your parents. I didn't want that. But hell yes, I thought about it. That bitch took my kids away from me. I've forgiven your mother for a lot of things, but I'll never forgive her for that."

Leo stood up and brushed off his knees with his hands.

"Don't tell your brother and sister that, they don't need to know."

"I won't, Dad," Leo said. He wasn't even sure that he'd wanted to know. It was a tough thing to know.

"I'm only telling you because you're my son. My firstborn. Someday you'll be a man and you'll understand that."

Leo stared at the tiles on the floor, tracing the grouted lines with the toe of his shoe, twitching and unsure what to think about this new information. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

[88] Arizona

"Looking at those photographs brought back some old memories, Frank, and the things they made me think about stayed with me for awhile, even after I left my parents' house and went to New York City. Thinking back about what my Dad and I talked about, it was like a crystallization of all the things I'd wanted to know for a long time."

They were getting close to the town now. Abandoned wooden buildings sprang up on the sides of the road in the beam of Leo's flashlight. They walked on.

"What kinda things?" Frank asked.

"It sounds silly if I just say it out loud. But I guess growing up like that, it left me wondering what a man really was. My father seemed like he was it, but he was far away most of the time. It wasn't my stepdad. I even had a guy I knew by my highschool, I used to take Chinese martial arts with him after school. He told me to call him Sifu. He was awesome, a really powerful guy, he knew all kinds of stuff, he had a bunch of students. I thought that maybe he was a real man, Frank. You could see it in his eyes, this energy, it was all positive, moving. I felt excited to be around him," Leo said.

"Then I found out that he was sleeping with a bunch of his female students. Had them all convinced that he had so

much chi he needed to get rid of it - I guess his wife wasn't enough."

"That ain't a man, Son."

"No," Leo said, and frowned. "You know what I'm talking about, right? I feel silly spelling it out much more than that."

"I know what ya mean. I imagine that's part a why I'm here, Son." Frank looked up at the eastern sky, dark and full of stars. It'd been a long day. "Ahyuh. I imagine that's why I'm here."

They were almost there.

[89] Maine

Leo turned away from the photographs on the mantel. It was almost mid afternoon. He retrieved his stove and cooler from the jeep parked out front of his parents' house and went to the back porch to cook a meal. It was a little weird, camping out in his parents' house like this, just as he had in so many others. He decided he wouldn't stay long, maybe just the night.

On the back porch, he fixed a quick meal of beans and corn, heated together in a skillet over his one burner gas stove. He got a glass of water from the kitchen sink. The well was gravity-fed, and still worked. It would work long after he left, until the pipes all rusted clean though. That would be awhile. Again, briefly, Leo thought about staying here.

While he ate, Leo surveyed the view off the back deck. His father usually trimmed the brush in the backyard, but hadn't been around this year to do it. Leo stopped chewing. It threatened to overwhelm him again, but he pushed it back down, swallowed it like a mouthful of corn and beans. Close. One night would definitely be enough. There was nothing here.

The water of the lake sparkled in his eyes through the brush and tree trunks that supported the green canopy

above. Leo could just barely see the beach down by the water from his spot up on the back porch. He didn't think he'd go down. The house was one thing, the water another.

[90] Before

When his father got remarried, it was the water that got Leo into so much trouble. He'd been seven when his parents divorced and his mother moved to the Midwest. He was eight when he returned to Maine the next summer. A new woman living with his father, his stepmom. Leo got along with her well enough, he liked her just fine, and he liked his new stepbrother, too.

But it was the water that got Leo in trouble. He wanted to go swimming all the time, and he was still too young to swim by himself. He'd always pester his stepmother to take him down to the water so he could swim. Usually she agreed. The day she didn't was what got Leo into trouble. He went anyway, even though she told him he couldn't go alone. He got in trouble and yelled at his stepmother. She didn't like that very much.

"You'll be in big trouble when your Dad gets home," she told him, half-smirking, half-angry.

"Nuh-uh," Leo told her. "I'll just tell him you're lying. He'll believe me because he's my Dad. You're just my stepmom."

It wasn't like that when Leo's Dad got home, though. His stepmom and father had talked while Leo did the dishes.

Then Leo got a spanking. He asked his father, through sniffles, why he'd taken his stepmom's side.

Leo was standing next to the bed, his fingers playing with the yarn strings on the edge of the quilt. His backside ached.

Leo's father turned in the doorway, about to leave the room. "Son, I love you," he said. "But she's my wife."

[91] Maine

His meal finished, Leo cleaned up his dishes in the sink and packed up his stove. It was getting late. He'd spent most of the afternoon sitting on the back porch, looking out at the water. Now he was finished with that.

It'd been enough and he didn't want to do it any longer. It was cathartic to think about all these things, and they seemed to have a special resonance now that his father was gone.

But he could only take so much of it. The sting of the losses, the baby with Jenny, Tamara, his father, even after so many months spent alone contemplating his life before the disappearances, still felt fresh in his mind.

Leo wandered around the empty house as he was considering these things, moving through the main floor and down onto the lower floor. He avoided his parents' bedroom. The door was barely open - he could see enough through the crack to view the tussled coverlet on the bed. It was obviously empty.

The power of his upbringing was still strong in him, though, in weird moments. He was never allowed inside that bedroom, and he couldn't bring himself to enter now. It was a violation of their inner sanctum that he couldn't breach even after they were gone.

On the lower level Leo found a door that was padlocked shut. He knew it led to the basement, and he knew that his Dad kept it locked to keep children from falling down the stairs. In recent years Leo's stepmom was always babysitting relatives' kids, and the danger of an accident in the basemen was high, with the furnace, household chemicals, and rusty boxes of nails left over from the construction of the house, all down there to injure curious little hands.

After retrieving his crowbar from the Jeep, Leo wrenched open the basement door. He wasn't sure why he did it. He couldn't bring himself to enter his parents' bedroom, but an intentionally locked door held his interest. He didn't mull over this much, in the time since the disappearances he sometimes found himself doing things without much thought. He simply shortcut right to action. It was easier like that, and it was an important way that his outlook had changed.

Leo shone his flashlight down into the darkness. He could smell dry wood. The mustiness of the air hit him on the third stair down. His flashlight roved over the stacked junk of his father's pack-rat habits - old skis, outer wear, boxes of nails, parts from the small engines of lawnmowers and three-wheelers, hunting tools, deer antlers,

unused copper piping, spools of electrical wire, and all manner of minutiae from years of yard sales and hording. Wooden shelves leaned against the bare concrete walls, with split, stacked wood in piles between them. The furnace sat dead in the corner, its iron door shut, surrounded by a corona of black soot. Leo crossed over to it, running his hand along the dusty oil tanks on the way.

The furnace was the object of so much of his father's labor - in the winter he stocked it's maw as many as three times a day to keep the radiators in the house pumping out heat. Leo's father cut and split twelve cords of wood each year to keep the furnace fed, supplementing it with four tanks of oil to heat water. Sometimes Leo's father would sit in front of it for hours, smoking cigarettes and feeding wood into the beast. Leo wondered what thoughts his father had as he sat there, hour after hour, what ideas and feelings kept his interest, down there in the cold cellar.

He approached the furnace then, moved toward it, tripping over kindling scattered across the cement floor. He stood in front of it, tapped the metal door with his knuckle. It made a dull clang. He examined it, the circle of light roved over the copper pipes, the valves, the thermostat wires. He wasn't sure exactly what he was

looking for, but somewhere in this beast was the key to understanding his father, he was sure of it.

Behind the furnace, barely visible, hung from a nail imbedded in the concrete, was a corkboard. The board was overflowing with pictures of Leo and his siblings, all when they were very young and still living in this house. Leo's mother was there, too, the only photos of her that Leo had ever seen of his real parents together - most had been expunged from both houses, cleaned out and burned like so much dry kindling.

Standing there in the darkness of the basement, the beam of the flashlight on the corkboard, Leo felt that he was one step closer to understanding the man who was his father. It was in these pictures, he thought, these real and hidden pictures, buried behind the object of so much of his father's continual and loving labor. Leo sighed and sat down on a large stump by the cellar wall. The stump was worn smooth from sitting, and too big to burn. There was something there, Leo thought. Too big to burn. That was it, really. Some things were just too big to burn.

[92] Arizona

"Where's a good place to get a new car, Frank? You've been in this town more than I have," Leo said.

They were almost in the town now. Leo was tired. Outbuildings and strip malls flanked the roads. It was dark. Leo estimated it was about ten, not that time had any real meaning. It was cooler than he thought it would be, considering the hot day.

"There's a shoppin mall about three miles up," Frank said. There's a twenty-four hour place next ta it, lots of cars there. Reckon I can find one I'll be able ta wire up, since I don't imagine it'll have keys."

"Sounds good," Leo said. He was tired. It'd been a long walk into town, with more still to go.

[93] Maine

After a night at his parents' house, Leo drove up the driveway, feeling like he always did when he left this place. He watched the house get smaller in the rearview, then disappear entirely as he steered the jeep around the driveway bend. Back up on the road, he moved toward the highway, then went south. He knew he had one more place to check, one last chance to find people. If anyone was still in this area, on this continent, they had to be in New York. Leo hit the road running. Maine was too much, and he wanted to leave. He was ready to leave, to give it up for dead.

He did.

[94] New York

It was a weeklong drive down to New York City, through a lonely New England. There were the usual cars wrecked on the side of the highway, but he was so used to steering around them now it was second nature, just like regular driving had been before. He barely even noticed it.

Instead, he spent his time on the road remembering the places he passed on the way, the aquarium in Boston, the Salem witch village, Martha's Vineyard, he saw signs for them from the road, but didn't pull off. He was done reliving old memories. One his journey across the US he'd relived everything he needed to. He was sick of it, sick with the memories.

Just outside New York City, Leo took a deep breath. He felt a little weak, he needed to eat but his coolers were almost empty. All he had left were beans and cans with no labels and didn't feel like pulling over to eat them. He knew that he should stop at a store, restock, but he didn't feel like going in. He wanted to make it to New York as fast as possible. A thin layer of sweat covered his brow and he lit a cigarette, smoking out his open window. He inhaled deeply, swinging the cigarette out the window every so often to let the wind pull off the ash.

The forested hills of upper state New York began to drop away, flattening out the land and getting more congested. Strip malls and suburbs popped up on either side of the highway, the buildings growing. As he got closer to the city, moving south on the highway, the cars began to pile up, thicker and thicker, slowing his pace to a crawl. He spent most of his time moving across the highway instead of down it, driving around one wreck after another. The concrete walls of the highway were broken beside the big wrecks, spilling cars and trucks out like water through a busted levee.

It was dusk when Leo found the first wreck he couldn't pass. A semi-trailer was jackknifed across the entire highway, the trailer on its side, spilling out pallets of boxed goods that looked melted from months of rain. Cars were pressed up against the semi three deep, spun together at weird angles, some up on other's hoods. All the windows were broken. All had flat tires. The concrete retaining walls cupped the whole mess like hands.

Leo pulled up to the wreck and got out. He walked around to the front of the Jeep, surveying the wreckage. He wasn't going to be able to get around that. He couldn't move the cars, he could get the jeep over them. He had to

back up, turn around, and go find an exit. He sighed. Dusk was turning slowly into darkness.

[95] Arizona

"I always wanted to go to New York when I was a kid, Frank. There are places in the world that are mythic, and the way I grew up, it made New York one of them. It's kind of like the Mouth, I guess, the way you talked about it being somewhere important. That's how I felt about New York. Everything important happened there, and I was sure that I was going to find something. I knew that it wasn't going to be the way it was before, but someone had to be there, still living there. It pulled me in like gravity," Leo said.

Frank nodded. They were getting closer to the mall. They kept walking through the darkness, the flashlight and stars the only lights.

[96] New York

It was too late to backtrack all the way to an exit. Leo remembered one about a mile back, but a mile with these wrecks would take an hour, and by then it would be too dark. The buildings around him were large enough to make deep shadows, and he didn't want to get lost in them, wandering around with only starlight overhead.

But Leo didn't want to sleep in any of the buildings nearby, either. There was something about cities that wasn't like country. He didn't like sleeping in strange buildings anyway. Cities made it worse. Out in the country, where he could see the land around him, he could just look out the window of a house or hotel and see grass, see trees, and that made him not feel like he was invading. He didn't feel like he was going into the dark places, the deep places that he had no right to be. In the country the buildings were only thin walls to protect from the outside.

But it was different in the city. The buildings added another layer, a darker layer, a deeper layer. Just standing there on the road by the Jeep, smoking a cigarette and looking at the wreck, he already felt the same as he did when he was inside a building in the country. He felt like he was already in someone else's space, already one layer into someplace he wasn't supposed to be. If he went

inside a building here, a house or a hotel, he would be going even deeper, like into a dark cave. That's what buildings were in the city. Human caves.

Inside a real cave, going deeper, back into the darkness where secret streams dripped water, forming stalactites and mites over centuries, deeper down into the black, past the cold, deeper, lower, sinking into the earth until it began to get warm again, into the places where geothermal vents heated the rock, warmed it, like he could feel the warmth of the earth, the body under the skin - that's what a real cave was like, and that's what going into buildings in the city was like. It was getting closer, deeper inside the human caves in a way that you couldn't do out in the country. Leo didn't want to do that. He didn't want to feel that, that human depth. It was frightening. Those places were not his to know, nor were their secrets. He would stay on the road.

He set up camp in the gathering darkness, pitching his tent without stakes on the concrete next to the Jeep. He didn't have wood for a fire, so he lit his gas lantern on the hood of the Jeep, placing it there like a beacon, a lighthouse fire. It was the only light around except for the winking stars overhead, the only man-made light for miles, for leagues, for all distance, everywhere, as far as

he knew. The light shone over his campsite, his tent, his Jeep, and the wreckage of an abandoned civilization.

He slept that night in his tent, curled up in his sleeping bag, cushioned only by the padded cloth from the concrete beneath him. He slept poorly, restless, his head filled with incomprehensible dreams.

In the morning he still didn't feel like eating, so he just packed up and left. He backtracked to an exit, found a smaller road, checked his maps, and went deeper into New York City.

For three days he drove into it, barely making miles over hours, finding wrecks, driving around them, sleeping each night camped between buildings that grew out of the ground like unnatural redwoods. They towered over his campsites at night, blocking out the stars.

The streets were deserted. Empty of all but things. It was surreal. He'd gotten used to the emptiness in smaller places, in empty plains and forests that were meant to be empty, but this place, this city that never slept - it was sleeping, all alone, like an unkempt bed without a body, without a soul.

Wreckage was everywhere, debris filled the canyons between the buildings. Cars, motorcycles, streetcars. He found two more destroyed planes, like the one that crashed

next to his apartment back home. Buildings were burnt husks, standing between other buildings that were pristine, but empty. It was like a tornado, hurricane, and earthquake struck the place all at one, leaving destruction the only occupant.

[97] Arizona

"New York was like the campsite in the canyon, Frank. I mean, that canyon, it was above us and we were down in it, and further down, where the walls get real high, that's what it was like there, except it was all man-made. We built it all, Frank. People, I mean, we took places like canyons, models like that, and made something that look just like them, but metal and glass, not rock."

"The difference, though, is that canyons are supposed to be empty, Frank. Some places are meant to be just empty. That city, though, it isn't. That's the thing, that's why I don't know that I can do it justice. I can't really describe how empty it was. But it was emptier than real canyons, because it was supposed to be full. New York City, empty, that was as crazy, as insane as canyons being full. If our campsite canyon was full of people, that's what New York City is like with no people in it. Just like that," Leo said. "Yeah."

Frank said nothing.

"You listening to me, Frank?"

Frank stopped walking. "Yeah, I'm listnin, Son."

"You don't seem like you are," Leo said.

"Well I am. And I seen empty places and I seen full places. I know how it is, ya don't gotta try to impress me

with it. I know what it's like to stand in a empty place like a canyon, look at it during a sunrise and feel needful, just like yer talkin about tryin to explain that city. I imagine if I take that needful feelin, that sense a wonder there, reverse it down, twist it all up like it ain't good, but awful instead, that's what yer tryin ta say, ain't that right?"

"Yeah," Leo said. "I guess that's about right." He thought a moment. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"Good," Frank said. "Don't think I'm not listnin to ya, just coz I ain't lookin at ya, Son. Sometimes a man's gotta keep watchin the road is all."

[98] New York

Leo didn't know all the names of the different parts of New York, but he knew he was getting close to the heart of the city when he saw signs for Manhattan. The wrecks were so thick now he knew he would have to get out and walk soon if he wanted to move deeper into the city.

A few minutes later it happened. He came upon another huge wreck and got out of the Jeep. He left the door hanging open, grabbed his pack, and started walking.

On foot, he was amazed how much more the buildings dwarfed him, and how much faster his travel was. The Jeep was impossible to navigate between all the wreck vehicles, but on foot he could just jump up onto the hoods of cars and walk across them, as long as he was careful not to slip on the slick hoods. He didn't want to twist his ankle or fall on broken glass. He almost did, once, and thought again about what would happen. The first aid-kit was back in the Jeep. If he got hurt here, he wasn't sure what he could do.

After two hours of walking he was deep into Manhattan. Posh apartments and commercial buildings rose above him like giants. He felt like a mouse under a herd of elephants.

It began to rain in mid afternoon, the summer downpour soon soaking his clothes into wet rags. They clung to him, weighing him down. His feet sloshed in wet shoes.

Still, he continued on, deeper into the city. Evening was fast approaching and the rain was turning cold. He didn't have his tent, or any other way to make camp in the rain, and he realized that he might have to stay in the city overnight, away from the Jeep. He didn't want to try to stumble back in the rain, in the dark.

The city was empty, dripping. He squinted through water running into his eyes, trying his best to shield them with his hand. His clothes were cold against his skin, his feet tired from walking what felt like miles. He had traveled for miles, miles and miles and miles. Jeep, now feet. Always moving forward. Always searching, finding nothing, and now in the heart of New York City, he was wet and cold, and just as empty as the streets.

He needed to find a place to stay, to get out of the rain and sleep. He was so tired, tired and hungry, weak with it, with this place, with this travel and this road.

A greener section of the city, rain pattering down against the concrete paths between the overgrown grass. Backpack heavy on his back, eyes stinging from the continual torrent of rain. Heavy. Tired. Hungry.

A place. A place soon or he would be overcome with it, overcome out here in the rain in the middle of this empty city with nothing in it. Doubled up, just like that, because that's the way things were, and that's how they happened. He needed a place.

He didn't want to go inside, go into any of these caves, these places that people lived and sidled away their secret things, their memories, their lives and hid them back like the dark places inside real caves, under the earth. He didn't know that he could stand it, thoughts running away. He wanted a cigarette, but the rain was impossible. Wet and cold. He kept trudging forward, foot after foot, dark doorways passing by, but he couldn't go in, he didn't want to go in those places.

Finally, after a long expanse of green, an overgrown expanse of grass, he saw it. A cathedral, it commanded the landscape around it, grey and massive, a place that wasn't a cave inside a cave. It was a cave in the middle of green. Just one layer and that was enough for Leo.

He could rest there, maybe. It could be the place. If anyone was around, if there was anyone left, that's where they would be and Leo would go in and find them and they would help him and feed him and let him sleep in their soft

beds between crisp white sheets, dry, and he would find them and they were in that place.

The steps up to the door, large, old wood. It opened. It was unlocked and he knew, Leo knew what that meant - inside there were people and they would take care of him, give him answers, he was okay, they were okay, it was okay, they would tell him when he got inside it was okay. This was a sacred place.

Inside, he dripped on the stone. He knew that stone was a good sign, too. Two good signs and only just inside the doorway. His flashlight over the entryway, inside, dropping his pack on the stone, closed the door with an echoing boom.

Back, back it stretched, the silence, the stone, out of the entryway it rose above him, stained glass windows streaming white light onto the stone, colors of white and green and red, scenes, dropping a man into the water and pulling a man out, glowing white and that's what it was, and Leo knew it and he wanted it too. He'd been on the road for so, so long.

Deeper, back, but instead of darker like those human caves it was lighter, he went in, wooded pews on both sides flanking like holy soldiers, like labia of the womb, he went back and in and it was like coming out into the light

and he missed his father and his mother and Tamara but that was okay because they were here and he knew they were here and the alter was getting closer.

He knelt and pulled off his wet shirt -it landed, a slopping sound, like pigs eating and that wasn't a good sign and he looked up and it was in front of him, everything that had been and he'd walked on, driven though, it was all there and it was staring him in the face. It stared at him and he stared back and he challenged it and it challenged him back and he felt it slam against him like a battering ram.

[99] New York

God, he missed them and they should be here but they weren't here and there wasn't anyone there and the soft crisp white sheets weren't there or the food and only the rain was gone, but that was the only good thing.

He felt it give a little, it was so close to giving, it'd been close by the gas pump but he'd held it back and it'd been close out by the road but he'd held it back and it was close down by his father's furnace but he'd held it back and he kept taking more things but it wasn't enough because when he thought about them he gave them away but they took more than he got back. He was sick of the taking and sick of the giving and the thoughts that weren't even thoughts anymore and sick of the words that weren't words anymore and he couldn't think anymore and he couldn't hold it back and he was tired and lonely and tired of being lonely and he couldn't hold it back so he didn't try anymore he missed them so much and he was so stupid where were they where did they go why did this happen he didn't know he was never going to know and he couldn't hold it back so he let it go he didn't hold it back it wasn't possible anymore and so it lost him and he got lost in it like everyone else was already lost.

Wracked, sobs, it roared out of him, his voice roared, it roared and roared and roared out, hands in his hair, pulling out roots, so much voice out of him his breath left him and he sobbed curled up on the stone in a puddle of rainwater. Head and hands, body and voice, out of him, echoing around, swirling out until his breath was so gone that it wasn't his.

No one was there. No one heard him.

He stood up, slowly, pulling himself to his feet to stand before the altar, chest bare and wet to the air. Numb. It was out of him and still in him and there was nothing and he was numb.

Tamara. The baby. His father.

He pulled the pistol from his belt and looked at it. It was an extension of his hand, cold and hard, black tempered steel. The barrel stuck out past the body of the main cylinder.

He pulled back the slide, pulling a bullet into the chamber. He let the slide go. It glided back with a click. He flipped the safety off and pulled back the hammer.

Tamara.

He knew that it would be easy. Simple actions, devoid of meaning. He felt cold. He'd been everywhere he needed to

go except one. Simple actions, no meaning. Lift, put it in, then pull, Lift, Put, Pull. Easy.

He practiced the motions over and over in his mind. Just those three things. No, one more after that, darkness. Darkness was an action. He knew that. He'd done that, so he knew that, just never all the way there. Only halfway a thousand times and each time back to the beginning, but a little further and now it was so close he was almost there.

The baby.

He put the gun in his mouth. His teeth clanked against the metal. It was cold. He felt the barrel with his tongue. It tasted like old gunpowder, that sulfur taste, that acrid burn of gun oil. His finger slid down slowly from its resting place on the trigger guard. Down, curling, squeezing, just a little to get a feel for it.

His father.

He closed his eyes. His heart wasn't pounding anymore, his palms weren't sweaty, just wet from the rain.

He felt calm. Nothing flashed before his eyes.

It was just dark behind his lids. He took a deep breath.

Pull. That was all that was left.

Just pull, then darkness. That was all, and those were the last things he needed to do.

[100] Arizona

They found the mall just where Frank said it would be, right next to the store. The store parking lot was filled with cars. It would be easy to find one in the morning.

Leo broke into the mall with the crowbar, moving through both sets of glass doors brandishing the flashlight. Inside the cavernous mall were rows of dark stores, their windows filled with mannequins dressed in the latest fashions from six months before. Kiosks sold dead cell phones, gold jewelry, and out of date calendars.

Leo and Frank walked through the mall looking for a place to camp. They passed fake plastic trees growing from red ceramic pots, and hard iron benches. Rats scurried from the beam of light as it passed over the fast food court.

"That's unsettling," Leo said.

"They won't bother ya."

Finally, Frank and Leo found a pair of leather couches in a seating area next to an empty fountain. Leo claimed one with his backpack and wiped off the dusty cushions. He sat down. It was cooler inside than he thought it would be.

Leo broke into a store that sold bedding and furniture. He collected blankets from the dusty shelves while Frank found a particle-board bookshelf and a wicker chair.

"What are those for?" Leo asked him. Frank was lugging the bookshelf and chair back toward the seating area.

"Gonna make a fire," Frank said. "Fountain's dry, it's as good a place as any."

"But, the smoke."

Frank pointed up at the ceiling. "Don't imagine that'll be a problem."

Leo shined his flashlight up. Above the fountain the sky light was smashed. The roof was open to the stars.

"How do you think--"

"Hail, probably. Not sure. Helps us some, though. Not point lookin a gift horse," Frank said.

"No, I guess not."

Frank broke up the bookshelf and chair, setting them alight in the dry fountain bed. The flames rose. The smoke flowed up to the hole in the broken skylight.

With a central source of light, the mannequins in the stores seemed much more eerie, they almost looked like people watching the pair from behind glass. Frank's shadow loomed huge on the wall as he stood by the fire, staring down into the flames. The wood popped.

[101] New York

He could feel the metal of the barrel between his lips, his finger was curled around the trigger. He took a deep breath, getting ready.

With his closed eyes, darkness enveloped him. He sent waves of himself throughout his body, feeling it, reminding himself what his legs felt like, what his arms, what his toes. He felt it and he knew it and it was him. He smelled the smoke on his clothes. He saw nothing but the back of his eyelids. It was time.

On the verge of the pull, Leo threw his waves outward, expanding himself beyond his body, letting himself spill over the thing he was, the place he was, getting ready.

He heard something. It was tinny, soft, and far away, just on the edge of his hearing, but something was there. He listened to it in the darkness behind his eyes, it grew in his ears as he focused on it, not sure if he'd already pulled the trigger or not.

He opened his eyes. He hadn't pulled it.

There was something there, he could hear a sound, repeating over and over in the up and down cadence of a human voice. Leo pulled the gun from his mouth and dropped it to the floor.

The sound was coming from off to his left, repeating over and over from a small doorway left ajar on the far side of the cathedral. He left the gun on the marble floor and walked toward the sound like a sailor caught in a siren call.

The doorway was wooden and he passed through it, the sound growing louder all the while, he could almost make out words now, it was definitely a human voice, repeating over and over, up and down, the cadence, the words.

Past the doorway was a stone hallway, flanked on both sides with more wooden doors. Leo moved down the hallway, pausing by each one to listen for the sound. He found the door halfway down the hallway, another ajar door, the voice tumbling in and out of it, half static, half words. Leo entered.

Inside he found a simple office, wooden desk, rain on the glass window in the corner. A straight-backed chair was in front of the desk, pulled out as if someone had just been there, had just been sitting there a moment ago. The dust the covered everything in a thick layer bespoke otherwise, but the image was still jarring.

On the desk was a source of the sound. An old ham radio sat in the dust, repeating words over and over through static. The radio sat on its battery, a huge green

thing that looked like it was from the forties, many from the army.

Leo blinked. He heard the words coming out of the radio, but couldn't register their meaning, it was the first time he'd heard a human voice that wasn't his own or a recording in over six months. He concentrated, trying to pick out the words through the static.

"...out there, I know it...lost...come to...Arizona...Frank...out there...looking for ya...not alone...come here..."

Leo didn't know what to do. He found a pencil on the desk and wrote down all the words he heard, sorting out the cut off words through the repeating message. He sorted it out as it repeated, found the missing words that were cut off through the static and wrote it all down on a notepad on the desk. He read it.

There was someone else out there and that person, that guy named Frank wanted him to come to a town in Arizona. He wrote circled the name of the town. Leo hadn't heard of it, but he was sure he could find it on a map. There was someone else out there. He ran that through his mind several times. Someone else.

Leo tore off the piece of paper and shoved it in his pocket. He bolted.

[102] Arizona

"That was how I heard from you, Frank, on that repeating message you set up. I guess one of the pastors at that church must have been a ham or something, he had that radio all rigged up with a huge battery. I guess the guy must have had the thing rigged up to turn on if it got a message or something, I'm not really sure how else the battery would last so long," Leo said.

"Musta," Frank said. He was sitting on the other leather couch, looking at the fire.

"It was pretty lucky, if you think about it. I never would have thought to turn on a ham radio on my own."

"Coulda been luck," Frank said. "Coulda been something else. Who knows? Ain't important."

[103] New York

Leo spent all night rushing back toward the Jeep through the dead city with his flashlight. He still hadn't eaten anything, or slept, but the thought that someone else might be alive in the abandoned wasteland that was now the world was enough to give him all the energy he needed. It took him all night to get back to the jeep, but he made it just as first light was breaking over the edge of the horizon. He ate a quick meal, slept a few hours in the front seat then hit the road.

[104] The Road

It took him little over three weeks to make it down to Arizona. He wasn't wandering around anymore, wasn't stopping unless it was absolutely necessary, and once he hit the wide-open states of the Mid and Southwest, there wasn't much traffic. He made good time. During the drive, all he could think about was Frank.

He speculated over him, trying to figure out who he might be, wondering if maybe there were others. The message over the radio hadn't been specific. Halfway to Arizona he wondered why he hadn't taken the radio with him, but tried to keep that thought out of his mind. The message was repeating. Frank would still be there when he got down to Arizona.

[105] Arizona

"Then I showed up in town, found your note painted on the street in the town square and came out here. You know the rest. That's about the end of the story," Leo said.

"Ayhuh." Frank nodded and lay down on his couch. "Time to catch a few z's. We can find a car in the morning." he said.

Leo almost protested, but didn't. He was tired. They'd left the campsite in the canyon early that morning, walked and talked all day, and now it was late. Leo closed his eyes.

Of course, that was really the end to the story. He didn't need to tell Frank what their first meeting had been like, Frank knew it already. But the story in Leo's mind was still moving forward, and that meeting was the next thing that happened.

[106] Arizona

Leo'd gotten to the town and found the message painted on the street in the town square, just like he'd told Frank. It was spray painted on the concrete with green letters, unskilled and splattered by someone who didn't really know how to use a can of spray paint. It gave directions to come meet someone named Frank, out in a campsite by the edge of the state park nearby, in the mouth of a canyon.

Leo checked his maps and found the place, it was about twenty miles away and he drove there quickly, his heart pounding, excited to finally meet someone else after all these long months alone.

In the back of his mind he was still unsure - it was pretty obvious that these messages were recorded, broadcasted, and written after everyone disappeared, but he didn't want to fully give himself over to hope yet. The hope had kept him alive in the past three weeks since New York City, but for all he knew he might show up and find nothing but a dead guy. Now that he was getting closer to finally finding someone, he did his best, which wasn't much, to try to reel his hope in, just in case.

The wilds of the Arizona desert sped past the Jeep as he drove out to the state park. Sand and rocky terrain,

scrub grass and dried bushes, boulders, there wasn't much there. He saw the signs for the state park and pulled in, found the dirt road leading out to the canyon entrance Frank said he would be.

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. So close now. Soon he would know.

He saw the old man, first, standing at the mouth of the canyon. The old man looked up at the sound of the Jeep and slowly stood. He dusted off his backside, then raised one hand in greeting to the Jeep, like a man trying to get the attention of his family in a crowd. There was no one with him.

Leo pulled up the Jeep on the edge of the campsite. It was simple, a firepit, two blue coolers, a rolled up sleeping bag in a small cleft of the red canyon wall. The old man was standing there, dressed in jeans and a plaid button-down, cowboy boots on his feet. He lifted his hat to Leo in greeting. White hair spilled out from underneath.

Leo got out of the Jeep and took a few steps toward the man, looking at him, not sure what to say. The old man's tanned and grizzled face broke into a yellow-toothed grin, stretching out the wrinkles around his eyes. His eyes were blue.

"Are you real?" Leo asked. He stood in front of the old man, feeling empty and full at the same time.

"Real enough," the old man said. "Name's Frank."

It washed over Leo then, all the months and days and hours since he'd last seen another human being. He fell to his knees, kicking up a cloud of dust. The dust settled before either of the men spoke again.

"I'm Leo," Leo said. "I...I've been alone for a long time."

"I expect so, Son," Frank said.

"I've been out on the road, looking, you're the first person I've found. I got your message."

"I figured that's how ya got here." Frank lifted off his hat and wiped his brow with a cloth from his back pocket.

"Is there anyone else?" Leo asked.

"Nope," Frank said. "Just you and me, and that's all. We got some things ta talk about, I suspect."

"Yeah," Leo said. His voice sounded weak to him. "Do you know what happened to everyone?"

"I've an inkling." Frank looked up at the sun overhead.

[107] Arizona

Leo yawned, opened his eyes again, then closed them.
He rolled over on his couch and fluffed up his pillow.

The story was over. That was all there was to tell.

Soon, Leo was fast asleep.

[108] Arizona

Leo stood in an art gallery. He was sure it was an art gallery in the way that dreams make you sure. Sometimes he'd see Tamara in a dream, but she didn't look like Tamara, or sound like her. The only way that Leo was sure it was Tamara was that feeling, that dreamy feeling that you just know something. And he knew this was an art gallery. That feeling told him that.

The painting that hung from the walls, underlit by soft lights, they told him that too. So did the wood floors and quiet hum of people talking in different wings of the building. Other details, they came together and cemented.

He wasn't sure what he was doing there. He just knew that he should be here, and he felt a pulled feeling, like he was almost there, but not quite. He began to move across the floor, vaguely unsatisfied, like a smoker that's quit and still feels that nicotine pull, years later. He heard his footsteps making clomping sounds on the wood, looked down, and was surprised to find himself wearing cowboy boots. It struck him as odd, since he never wore cowboy boots. He didn't even know anybody who wore cowboy boots except for Frank.

Leo moved through the hallways of the gallery, coming out of the confined spaces into a larger room. The ceiling

soared above him. An old man dressed in khaki pants and a black shirt sat on a wooden stool reading a newspaper. The man wore earpiece. He took a casual glance at Leo as he entered, but then went back to reading his newspaper. Leo wasn't interested in the attendant either, and moved on.

Across the cavernous room, its walls lined with giant impressionistic paintings of scenes from the holocaust and World War Two, was a doorway to another section of the gallery. He wasn't sure why, but that's where his uneasiness was leading him, toward that section. He approached it.

Leo paused at the opening. Hanging on the walls inside the small annex were old impressionistic paintings. They looked on at scenes from cities in the 1800's, buildings, people walking the streets, cabs pulled by horses, newsboys waving papers, and others. Leo wasn't particularly interested in them. He didn't know much about art. People were more his interest.

He paused again. That didn't seem right. He was interested in art. He entered the annex.

At the far end, in front of another painting of a city, stood a young man. Leo saw him from behind. He was staring at the painting in front of him. He had clipped brown hair and was dressed plainly for an art gallery. Leo

almost slipped back out of the annex when he saw the young man. His unsatisfied feeling flared up in force - Leo was sure that he was supposed to find that young man, but he didn't want to get noticed right yet.

As if he'd heard a noise, the young man turned.
"Hello," he said.

"Hi there," Leo heard himself say. Was that his voice? Even in a dream, his voice never sounded like that. It sounded familiar to him, though, even if he couldn't quite place it. It was like hearing his voice on a recording.

The young man turned back to the painting. Leo took a few steps forward, trying to get a glimpse of what he was looking at. It was a painting of a scene from industrial-age New York, but it looked like it was in the middle of an earthquake. The multicolored blobs of people stood, arms akimbo, clutching streetlights with fists. A man attempted to grab the reins of what looked like frightened horses about to trample a small boy. The boy was on his knees, hands on his head. There was a black hole in the middle of the peach splotch of the boy's face - he was screaming.

Leo was about to step out of the annex, sure now that he wasn't ready yet for the culmination of the uneasy feeling that led him there. Before he could leave, the young man spoke. It was as if by hesitating Leo caused the

next thing to happen. Dreams were like that - the sequence of events moved forward, almost of their own volition.

Sometimes everything moved like that.

"Do you like paintings?" the young man asked.

"Uh, sure I do," Leo stammered out.

"So do I," the young man said. He looked like he was in his early twenties, tall and lean. He had a five o'clock shadow and red-rimmed eyes. They made him look brash and knowing, almost comical, as if he was in on some inside joke.

"See this painting? That boy in the center, under the horses? And that man, the one trying to pull the horses back?"

The young man cocked his head to the side like a cat. "Why's he doing that?"

"Well, it's the right thing to do, I suspect," Leo said. Suspect? Since when did he use words like that? It's the sort of thing that Frank would say. Leo looked down at his hands. They were old and gnarled, with yellow nicotine stains on the fingers. They weren't his hands. They were Frank's hands.

"Look kid, what's yer name?" Leo asked the young man.

"I'm John," he replied, without taking his eyes off the painting in front of him. "You're Frank, right?"

"I am," Leo said.

"Good," John said and turned back to the painting.

"It's an earthquake, I think."

"Looks like it," Leo said.

"Look, Frank, can I ask you a question?" John turned his eyes away from the painting and looked straight into Leo's.

"If I was that boy would and you were that man, would you do what he's doing? Try to hold back the horses?"

"I would try, Son," Leo said.

John cocked his head to the side again. "Why?"

[109] Arizona

The sunlight came through Leo's half-open eyes, filling them with lens flares. He sat up on the couch in the middle of the mall. Light was pouring in the broken skylight above, illuminating the seating area like a spotlight.

Leo groaned. He looked up at the sky. The sun was directly overhead. Leo felt tired and sore, like he'd been running a marathon and had barely stopped to rest. He dragged himself up and stood.

Frank was bent over, rekindling the fire. He retrieved a can of beans from Leo's backpack, opened it and set it down on the cement, close to the growing fire.

"Well," Leo said, then stopped. He wanted to talk about his dream, but he wasn't really sure how to begin. The young man in the dream, John, he was sure that it was the same guy from the vision up at the Mouth, the one Leo'd kept from Frank before.

"I keep dreaming, Frank."

"Yeah?"

"I've been seeing John in my dreams."

Frank stopped tending the fire and straightened up. Leo looked at the back of Frank's head.

"Look, Frank, this is gonna sound weird, but he seemed to know you."

"That so?" Frank said, still not turning around.

"Yeah. Frank, how many times have you done this? How many people have you been with like this? Am I dreaming about someone else that--"

"No, no, I don't think so," Frank said. "Don't reckon it's anything like that."

"What is it then, Frank? Why did John know you? I was you, but I wasn't, and we were in an art gallery. We were talking about earthquakes."

Frank turned around, a sick look on his face.

"That's...ah...quite a mystery, Son."

Frank's can of beans began to simmer by the fire. Steam rose from it.

"Why am I dreaming about John, Frank? I saw him up at the Mouth, too. Why?"

"Ya didn't tell me ya saw him up at the Mouth."

"Who are you, Frank? What does John have to do with you? I've been dancing around that question for a while now. I saw John up at the Mouth, but I didn't say anything because I didn't know who he was. How does he connect to me? You didn't seem surprised when I talked about him. I've been pretty patient, but I'm not sure that I can wait much

longer." Leo heard the can of beans start to boil. Bubbles rose and popped in the broth, unsettling the beans.

"I..." Frank began. "I'm almost done figuring it out, Son. I've tried explaining it to ya, but ya just keep askin' me. I'm a mentor of sorts. I'm here because yer here, and I'm helping ya come to terms with what ya gotta to keep movin' on. That's what I do. That other boy, John, yeah, I know him. I thought he was you, but I was wrong. This sorta thing, what's happening to you, it happens to folks sometimes when they needs ta learn something they ain't getting' ahold of. I help with that, in different ways."

Leo took a deep breath. "So I'm here to figure something out?"

"That's right, Son."

"And what's that?"

"I can't tell ya, exactly. Things need ta be earned, Son."

"And John? What did you mean you thought he was me?" Leo asked.

"It ain't a science, what I been called to do. It ain't always spot on. Yer dream in the gallery there, that happened. I met John, I thought he was you, I thought I was supposed to be with him, but I was wrong." Frank let out a deep, long, sigh.

"When was that?" Leo's throat clenched. He already knew the answer, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

"The night of the disappearances. I'm supposed to be there when it starts, ya see. And I went wrong with you," Frank said.

The can of beans by the fireside boiled over and toppled into the fire. The coals hissed and fizzled out.

"You mean that I wandered around the fucking U.S. for six goddamn months scared and alone because you made a fucking mistake?" Leo's face felt instantly hot. He was furiously, standing next to the smoking fire, fists clenched, heart pounding.

"What the fuck, man? Do you know how many nights I screamed my lungs out at the empty sky, all alone, looking for somebody? You know what I almost did in New York. You knew all this and you've been keeping it from me while I poured out this entire story while you just calmly listened? How am I...Jesus Christ..." Leo lost all his words. He was livid now, seething, shaking like a sapling in a hurricane. He didn't know what else to say. He lit a smoke and sucked in the hot air, burning a third of it in one desperate drag. His face exploded, coughing.

Frank watched, just listening with a blank expression on his face. Leo finished the cigarette, smoking the rest slowly, before Frank spoke. His voice sounded tired.

"There ain't no call for all that, Son. I've been listening ta ya bitch and moan about what ya been through, and it ain't as bad as that. Folks is been through much worse. It ain't like it was for you, with everyone disappearin like that. Some's got it different, and tougher. I know that don't make a lick a difference to ya, but it's the truth, whether ya want it or not. Now, I'm sorry for my mistake, but things is the way they is. Ya need ta learn that."

Leo tossed the spent butt of his cigarette in the fire and exhaled the last breath of smoke upward. He stared at Frank with cold eyes, but said nothing.

"Now ya got two options, Son. Only two and that's all, so you listen up. One. You calm yer fumin' ass down and we get through the rest of this and get to soundin' it out so this thing is done, or you get yer ass outta my sight, coz the way yer talkin to me I don't know that I can stand the look of ya much more. Either one's fine with me. Make yer choice." Frank spit in the dust on the floor.

[110] Arizona

"What happens when we're finished, if I stay?" Leo asked. It was funny the way a little human contact got into him like a drug - he didn't want to give it up now, not after so long alone.

Frank looked up at Leo from the dust, his eyes just under the rim of his hat, two bright opals in red Arizona earth. "When you're finished, you can move on," Frank said. "And so can I."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you go to whatever's next. I can't rightly say, coz I ain't never done it. I go somewhere else, to someone else."

Leo felt the anger rising again, it was another typical Frank response, imprecise and mystical. He thought about it for a moment. Maybe Frank really didn't know, though. Maybe Frank really was working it out alongside him. Leo wasn't sure.

He thought that all this business about realizing, about finishing something, well, maybe it was all bullshit. He wished his life were just back to normal, back the way that it was, living in Tamara in his apartment and dealing with the daily stresses that paled in comparison to the places he'd been. It'd been a long road.

That was the problem with the whole business, this whole entire thing. Maybe it was time to think about that, think about the other things in his life that were useful. It was silly, all this reflection. It didn't help him survive now, almost alone.

"Now I'll tell ya what we need ta do," Frank said. "Yer story's all out now, it's fresh in yer mind and you been running it over and over." Frank picked up Leo's backpack from the edge of the fountain and tossed it at him. Leo caught it.

"Now that it's all in yer mind we need to go back to the Mouth. That'll get you where ya need to go next."

Leo sighed. "Fine," he said.

[111] Arizona

Frank and Leo found an old Buick that Frank thought he could hot wire in the parking lot of the store next door. Leo smashed the back passenger window to unlock the doors and Frank had the car started in less than two minutes.

The trip back out of town into the desert went quickly. Frank drove. Neither of them spoke. The town fell away behind them.

An hour later, up at the top of the Mouth again, Leo took his seat on the stone. He sat cross-legged.

It was much the same as before. Frank produced a pipe filled with the strange mixture. Leo smoke. Frank hummed and sang his strange song.

Unsure of what he would find, Leo went in.

[112] Arizona

A vision again, just like before.

A young man at a campsite, not Leo, sitting by a fireside up in the mountains. His tent fluttered in the wind.

John. It was John, camping alone in the mountains. Leo stood next to John like a ghost, watching John make dinner, dumping a can of soup into a pot and heating it over a single burner gas stove.

John. Leo knew his name now. It was John.

The young man looked up. He squinted his eyes in Leo's direction, squinted them up good like he was trying to see something that wasn't there, but Leo was and John looked like he knew it. His eyes seemed to come into focus and he unsquinted them, seeming to look right at Leo.

John spoke, his mouth moved, but Leo heard nothing. John was looking right at Leo, moving his mouth open and closed - Leo could hear other sounds, the wind flapping the tent, the crackle of the fire, the hiss of the gas stove, but he couldn't hear John. There were no words there, none at all.

Finally John seemed to understand. His mouth closed and stopped it's flapping, his head moved back on his neck as if coming to a realization. He nodded, then looked

around his campsite, searching for something, not looking at Leo. John didn't find what he was looking for, it didn't look like it, anyway, and he looked back at Leo. His eyes lit up and he spread his hands wide out from both sides, sticking them straight out, then swooping them forward and back into himself in a gathering motion. It looked to Leo that John was trying to pull in all the air around him, grab it like it was soft and fluffy. Once his arms were back close to him, John put them straight out and pulled them up and the elbows, gathering again.

No, Leo thought, then knew it.

John isn't gathering. He's beckoning. He wants me to come to him. He wants me to come meet him up there.

John looked right at Leo. He nodded. Leo woke up.

[113] Arizona

"I know what I have to do," Leo said. "I have to go meet John. He's waiting for me."

"I don't know that's such a good idea," Frank said.

Leo shook his head. "No, Frank, It's exactly what I have to do."

"How will you find him?"

Leo looked north. "I know where he is," he said, staring at the horizon. "I can feel him."

Frank sighed and shrugged. He sat back down on his stone seat. There were dark circles under his eyes.

"Goodbye, Frank," Leo said. "Thanks for everything."

"Goodbye, Son," Frank said.

Leo turned and left, leaving Frank sitting alone on top of the Mouth. It was the last time he saw him.

Leo took the Buick and drove north, toward the Rockies.

It was almost over now. He could feel that, too.

[114] The Rockies

The sky was a bright blue above him, the sun burning down as Leo walked up the trail, struggling to keep his weighty pack balanced on his back. When he'd packed the thing down by the base of the mountain he'd put all the heavy stuff, the gas cookstove, the cast iron skillet, the cans of roast beef hash, down on the bottom of the bag.

The trail was tough climbing, most of the time at a pretty steep angle. The path was a mix of gravel and dirt. Rocks jutted out of the path, smoothed by years of climbers, like the stone steps in front of the church in New York. Leo kept struggling under his pack as he climbed, sometimes snatching a handful of nearby bushes to keep from toppling over. He tried to keep leaning forward to keep the weight on his back balanced, but it was hard to just look at his booted feet with all the mountain around him.

He decided to take a break at the next flat spot he found and take a look around. He found one in ten minutes, a flat place where the trail widened out and a bench and a trashcan were placed off to the side. The trash bag had been ripped open and plastic wrappers were spread all over the ground. He took off his pack and leaned it against the bench, collapsing down on it with a groan.

The view was magnificent. The air was clear and vibrant, it rushed out of his lungs in great gasps. The trail twisted down the mountain like a brown snake, scaled with rocky scales, and curled between the green sides of brush and small trees. The trees where getting smaller the higher he climbed, becoming squat and thick instead of tall. The valley underneath him was deep and seemed far off, colored with an ever darkening rainbow of greens.

Leo was surprised by how far he'd climbed in the two days he'd been hiking up the mountain. In the distance, other peaks rose higher than the one he was climbing now, some snow capped on the tips. Fog circled the highest.

He glanced up the mountain, father up the trail. It wound up, twisting away from his vision about a half a mile up the path, slinking away behind an outcropped boulder. The vegetation thinned as his eyes moved the trail, becoming nonexistent close to the summit, which was a patchwork of menacing white and black rock. The summit seemed far off, though, distant, and this made it seem a little mysterious, vague somehow. But this feeling was transient, like after passing back binoculars. He just saw, and now couldn't anymore.

Leo looked back down. Even the valley below, where he'd parked the Buick and gotten out to hike up, seemed far

off. It spread out before him like a stretching cat, curling its toes, then turning her wide eyes to look at him. He laughed a little at that image, thinking about the cat of the valley fighting with the snake of the path, wondering who would win.

Leo stood up and spread his arms straight out from his sides, taking a giant breath and exhaling as though he could blow down the entire mountain underneath him. He felt like he was paralleled between two great and awful places, the valley and the summit, both containing the mystery of the unknown, trapped between the zenith and the nadir of the world itself. Yes. Those words seemed right somehow. Zenith and Nadir. They were old words, fully of powerful magic and he felt the same way about this place. It was a powerful place, maybe like the Mouth

He sat back down on the bench and stared at it for awhile, deciding to have a smoke. He dug in the front pocket of his pack, searching around until he found his smokes and Zippo. He lit the cigarette with a flick of his thumb, then took a drag while leaning forward and sticking his feet out straight before relaxing.

This was beautiful country. Leo wondered why he'd never come out here before, maybe on a trip with Tamara, maybe to go camping. He felt that about many of the places

that he'd visited since everyone disappeared. He wasn't sure why he'd never been to them before. Not enough time, he guessed. He was always doing something else, something that kept him busy and unable to go out and see what there was to see in, well, everything.

He smoked slowly, enjoying the feeling of the nicotine seeping from his lungs, into his bloodstream and out to the tips of his body. His fingertips twitched with it. This was his first smoke of the day, he'd cut back while climbing since smoking wasn't something to do while exercising. The first smoke of the day was always the best, it spread out in him and got into his brain, lighting up the synapses and making him feel lightheaded for forty-five seconds. Leo leaned into that feeling, embracing it and letting it carry him up the mountain. He felt light and whimsical, but was careful not to lean into the feeling of the smoke too long. Too long and the feeling made you sick.

Looking up the trail to the summit, Leo was on the verge of putting his smoke out, exhaling the last breath slowly letting the smoke curl up and out of his mouth like a rolling fog, watching it as it left his mouth and seemed to merge with the gray clouds higher up the mountain, when he noticed that not all of the smoke on the mountain was his.

Further up the mountain, he wondered why he hadn't noticed it before, a thin trail of smoke rose up into the sky. It was small and wispy, like the smoke of a campfire and Leo stared at it, almost in disbelief. He was wondering if maybe a forest fire had started up in the high climes, wondering so hard and so long that he didn't notice that he was still holding the cigarette until the heat on his fingers caused him to drop the smoke suddenly.

He shook his fingers in the cooling breeze and stamped out the cigarette, cursing under his breath. Sucking on his burnt fingers, Leo turned his face from the brown dirt at his feet, scrolling back up the trail and up the mountain again. The smoke was still there, still a thin stream, constant and alluring.

John was up there, waiting for him. Leo was sure of it. Nothing to do but keep walking up the trail. Maybe it was time for that, after all.

Leo shouldered his pack, unable to keep his eyes off the smoke rising higher up the mountain. He started walking again, quickly moving away from the rest area, moving as fast as his legs could pump up the trail. He soon left it behind, but slowed, unable to keep the breakneck pace, he'd just smoked. His pack seemed lighter, though, and he as he climbed the feeling of lightheadedness that he'd

experienced while smoking did not leave him. It was not unpleasant and it made for easier climbing.

Leo climbed all afternoon, keeping his eyes on the smoke above him. It was constant and unyielding. With his eyes on the pillar of smoke, he was startled when he almost lost his balance while walking along a steep ledge, between a rising cliff and a sharp dropoff.

He groped for a nearby sapling, holding to it and wrapping one of its young branches around his fist as he steadied himself. The valley below loomed up at him, this time feeling less like a welcoming housecat. His breath roared out of his lungs and his heart pounded wildly in his chest as he peered down the cliff face to the ground far below, visions of his ghastly death dancing in his mind.

Falling would be a horrible way to die. The sudden stop at the bottom would be nasty, but that wouldn't be the worst part. The falling is what would be terrible. Those seconds, trapped in a speeding air pocket, dropping to the earth - would his life flash before his eyes? And when he hit, crushed against the rock by his own weight, his body smashing in on itself, forcing the air from his lungs, shattering his bones, would his world just go out? What then?

Maybe, he thought, all these grisly ideas clattering around in his brain like rocks in a blender, he better slow down and take it easy. The smoke would still be there when he got up to it. John would still be there.

Leo sat down on the edge of the overhang, his legs dangling over the edge, trying to calm down. His left hand was still wound around the sapling branch. He caught his breath, smoked again, and reaffirmed his choice to take it easy, then stood again and continued on his way up the mountain.

After his brush with nothing, Leo did take it slower. He placed his feet thoughtfully, searching for firm spots on the ground that didn't look unsafe or slippery. He kept his eyes close to the ground in front of him, only glancing up to reconfirm the presence of the smoke when he had a few clear steps planned out. His pack was still feeling lighter, but he tried to spend more attention on it, to become more aware of its presence so it didn't unbalance him.

He walked and climbed the rest of the afternoon, into the early evening. He had no more narrow escapes from the nothing, and his pace was less erratic. He walked until the sun was beginning to look like it would set soon - the shadows on the ground were long and tired. The smoke was

much closer now, and from where Leo stood, in another campsite clearing area, there seemed to be a reddish glow reflected upward from the origination of the smoke. He was almost sure now that the smoke was from a fire. John's fire.

It didn't seem like he was going to reach it that day. It was still too far off, and his experience with the ledge earlier had taught him that he didn't want to be walking in this country after dark. He looked around at his surroundings, the clearing campsite area, and concluded that this would be as good a spot as any to spend the night.

Leo set down his pack and unpacked it slowly, spreading the contents he thought he would need out on the rocky ground. A small pup tent, a mummy bag, a one burner gas cookstove, a flashlight, a can of roast beef hash, a hatchet, and matches emerged from the depths of the pack.

He set the tent and the sleeping bag off to the side to set up later and grabbed the flashlight and hatchet to help him gather wood in the growing shadows. Before long, he had a sizable pile of reasonably dry wood collected from the small number of downed trees nearby. He collected about ten large rocks, which were easier to find than the wood,

and built a ring of stones in the center of the trail's clearing to keep the fire contained.

He didn't really need a fire, he had the stove to cook his dinner, but the light was comforting and he'd become accustomed to watching the flames at night by his time spent with Frank. Darkness was falling quickly, encasing the mountainside in black tar.

It took him a few minutes to start a fire, using scraps of shredded bark from one of the pieces of wood, along with some waxy gum wrappers he found in his pocket. The small flames grew quickly when he added the wrappers, and he added bits of kindling to keep them going, putting in larger and larger pieces until he could add some of the larger branches. He set the bigger branches, those that were a little damp, close enough to the growing fire so they could dry out for use later.

Once that was done Leo set up his tent, spread his sleeping bag down on the ground by the fire, and lit the gas burner with one of his matches. He opened the can with a can opener from his pack, dumped the contents into the skillet, and set it on the burner to heat.

While his dinner was cooking, Leo smoked and tried to locate the smoke further up the mountain. He found it easily. It was the only other light he could see on the

mountainside, aside from the stars overhead, just beginning to blink into existence. He was sure now that the smoke he'd seen during the day was from a fire - the light was easy to see in the growing darkness.

Soon his dinner was done. Leo tossed his smoke into the fire. He removed the skillet of hash from the burner with his shirt sleeve, turned off the burner, and used a fork from his pack to eat. There was something to that, simple things, he thought.

Later, after the fire burned low, Leo pulled his bag inside the pup tent and lay down to sleep. He was tired, he'd been trekking up the mountainside all day, but sleep would not come to him. His mind raced, raced over thoughts of his life, of Frank, but mostly he wondered about the smoke further up the mountain, about John.

These thoughts swirled round and round in his head, until Leo realized he was getting nowhere. He tried to relax.

Before a few minutes had passed, he dropped off to sleep.

[115] The Rockies

Leo awoke early, to the sound of birds. Orange light filtered through the thin walls of the tent. He thought it was strange that there would be birds this high up on the mountainside.

He had little recollection of his dreams, which was unusual - normally his dreams were alive, vivid in his memory in the few moments after he awoke. This morning, nothing came to him as he searched his sleep-addled brain, so he pulled himself up from his bag with a groan. He'd gotten used to sleeping on the hard ground, mentally anyway, but he wasn't sure that his body would ever be. Soft mattresses, back in his old life, were too much ingrained in his muscle memory.

Out in the world again, out from the bleeding orange of the tent's filtered light, Leo blinked in the foggy sunlight. It was a glorious morning - birds chirping, clean air to suck into his lungs, and Leo felt well rested, if a little sore. Dew adorned the outside of his tent and the grassy vegetation around, glistening in the early morning light.

"It's gonna be a scorcha," Leo told the birds nearby, which twittered back at him. He lit a smoke and set about

making his breakfast, another can of hash that he pulled from his pack and heated over the gas burner.

When his breakfast was eaten and he'd tidied up the camp, he packed his pack again quickly and set off up the trail. The sun was still rising, it's gleaming reds and oranges fading into the white light of day. He was getting higher up now, and as he climbed further up the trail he wondered if maybe his earlier prediction about the day had been wrong. The sun was shining brightly overhead, but the day didn't seem like it was heating up. Maybe he was up a little higher than he thought. He might need his sweatshirt later.

He walked up the brown trail, trying to keep his eyes on the path, though they occasionally moved up to the smoke, which was still there.

After about two hours, when the sun was taking its dominant place in the sky, he came to a path that curved around a small mountain pond. The pond was fed by a cascading waterfall that poured out from a spring further up the mountain. The water poured down into the pond, roaring and splashing water up onto his face. It was beautiful. The water in the pond was clear - he could see all the way to its sandy bottom on the water that wasn't

white with froth from the waterfall. Rocks adorned the edge of the pond.

Leo briefly considered taking a swim, but discarded the idea when he looked up and noticed how close the rising smoke was from the waterfall. He would probably be there soon. His excitement kicked up again, and all the calm he could muster was unable to calm it. As he rushed up the trail, feeling a bit like a waterfall running backwards, he stumbled several times, but recovered.

After trudging up the trail for another twenty minutes, though to Leo it felt like hours, Leo emerged in another clearing, another campsite laid out by the people who used to manage the mountain. Benches lined the edges, surrounded by green bushes, though the trees were almost all gone now. The floor of the clearing was a mix of gravel and dirt, roughed up by the passing of spring rains and traveler's footsteps.

The smoke Leo had seen down the mountain was coming from a small campfire, set in a ring of stones. A blue tent was set up close to the fire, its canvas sides pulsing as if alive in the breeze that tumbled down the mountainside. A young man sat by the fire, poking it with a stick. John.

Leo blinked twice. Then he blinked again to make sure that what he was seeing was real. The young man still sat by the fire, poking it, and he hadn't noticed Leo yet.

Leo wasn't quite sure what to say. It'd only been a few days since he'd left Frank, he'd been on a high speed burn from Arizona to the Rockies, but aside from Frank, this young man before him was the only other human being Leo had seen in over six months.

"I..." he started. "Um...hello." The words felt thick in his mouth.

The young man looked up, but didn't seem startled. It was John, the same guy from Leo's dreams. "Hello," he said, then dropped the stick he'd been using to poke at the fire.

Leo took a step forward and almost stumbled over a small, old tree stump. He didn't really know what to say. All his words were lost.

"John?"

The young man looked at him, squinting at him for a moment then leaning back on his heels, like he'd been expecting Leo. "Yes," he said. "I'm John. You're Leo, right?"

"Uh...yeah. How did you know that?" Leo took another couple of steps forward and then stopped. "I mean, how could you know that?"

John chuckled and picked up his stick again. "Come over here. Join me. You can set down your pack and we can talk awhile."

Leo moved quickly over to John's campsite and shrugged off his pack, which fell down to the rocky earth. "How do you know who I am?"

"Dreams," John shrugged. "I've been dreaming about you." He poked the fire again, flipping his head down and dropping his brown hair over his eyes.

"What?" Leo dropped to the dirt, landing on a sharp stone. He flinched, but said nothing.

"The dreams, you know? I've been dreaming your dreams."

"Uh..."

John looked up from the fire. "There's only two left on the planet, Leo. And I've been dreaming your dreams."

Leo just stared, then his words found him, crawling out from under the rock of bewilderment that had stuck in his mind. "Actually, there's not two. There's three."

John laughed. "Oh, you mean Frank?" His chest rose and fell in laughter. "No." He looked at Leo. "Just two."

"But Frank—"

"Oh, Frank's real enough, Leo. It's me. I'm not here. Not yet." John stood up, looking out over the vast country

that lay down the side of the mountain. Framed by it as he was, dark against the sunlight, Leo felt like he was looking through him, down the side of the mountain and into the valley below - all this view happened in a second, though it seemed to take a very long time, telescoping back from the valley floor, up the mountainside, into John's eyes, into Leo's.

"What, you're a ghost?"

John chuckled again. "No. Not a ghost. Just not here."

"Where are you then, if you're not here?"

"That's the question, isn't it, Leo? I'm trying to figure that out. And I've been waiting here, at this campsite, for six months, waiting for you to help me do that. Are you game?"

"Uh...I guess so," Leo said. But he wasn't really sure if he was.

[116] The Rockies

Leo sat down on a rock while John made coffee.

"I don't suppose you have sugar?" John asked. "My supplies are running pretty low."

"No," said Leo. He was still stunned by the whole scene. It seemed silly to be talking about things like sugar when all the answers he'd been looking for were a few feet away from him, encapsulated in the other young man.

"Look," Leo said. "I don't know how else to ask any of this, so I'm just gonna ask it. What's going on? Why did everyone disappear? Who are you? Who is Frank? Where did everyone go?"

John looked up from the percolator. "Yes," he said. "I suppose you'll be wanting to know those things. I won't beat around it."

He looked down into the fire. "I guess I'll start with Frank. Frank, well Frank's not like us, not really human, I mean. He's something else - he helps people figure things out. He's been helping you figure things out, hasn't he, Leo?"

"Maybe," Leo said. "Not really, mostly he's just been confusing me. What do you mean, anyway, that he's not human? What is he then? Is he real?"

John sighed. "I'm not really sure exactly how to explain it. He's real enough. But not like us. He's real like thought is real, it's always there, sometimes in the back of your consciousness, sometimes the front, but always there. You invented him, Leo, by needing him. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Kind of," Leo said. "He said some things like that, but he wasn't very clear."

"Yes," John said. He took the percolator away from the fire and poured two tin mugs. "He's not. He's very old, and I think that he's gotten tired. But not only that, Frank becomes the counterpart of whomever he's with, what that person needs, I suppose, and Frank is what you needed."

Leo took the cup of coffee that John offered and wrapped his hands around it. "What I needed?"

John sipped his coffee. "Yes, Leo. What you needed. A mentor, a man, or what you thought one was."

"I don't understand."

"That's what's been on you mind, hasn't it, Leo? Your father, that baby that you lost with Jenny, starting a new life with Tamara - you've been worried about those things, they've been getting you stuck, and Frank, well, Frank came and you made him."

Leo didn't know what to say. It was right, what John was saying, he knew it was right, but no words came to him. He thought for awhile, sipping his coffee and looking down at the fire. Finally, he was ready to speak again.

"Where did everyone go, then? Why did everyone leave?" he asked.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" John said. "You got stuck, Leo. Everyone else didn't. Everyone is always traveling, Leo, moving and changing and riding around. Everyone is always moving. Sometimes people stop, though, they get stuck, and then Frank comes, or others like him. They help people get unstuck."

"But Frank didn't really help me," Leo said.

"Didn't he?" John asked.

"No, he didn't. He wasn't there when everyone left, he said it himself. He wasn't there to help me."

"Oh, Leo." John shook his head. "That's how he helped you."

Leo set down his cup and stood up. "I...I don't understand."

"You will, I think. You will."

"But what about you?" Leo asked. "Who are you then?"

John looked up at Leo. He set his cup aside. "I'm what could be, Leo. Frank got confused with us, in the end it

was for the best, but he got confused and that kept me here since I'm tied to you."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I know you don't. Not yet. But it's time, anyway, and we have to bring this to an end. You won't understand right away, it will take you awhile longer, but it's time, anyway." John stood up.

"It's time to leave, Leo. It's time to get unstuck. Follow me." With that, John started walking back down the path Leo had taken up the mountain.

Leo froze in place for a moment, then walked fast to catch up. "Where are we going?"

"It's not far, Leo. Not far at all now," John said.

[117] The Rockies

It wasn't far, John was right.

They walked in silence down to the waterfall Leo'd passed on the way up to John's campsite. The waterfall cascaded down into a small pool with clear water. Leo could see the sand at the bottom, but couldn't tell how deep it was.

The pair paused at the top of the waterfall, looking down into the churning whitewater spreading out into the pool.

"This is it, Leo," John said. "This is the end."

He paused for a moment, biting his lip.

"Frank helped you sort it out, get your head around it, but it takes more than that. It takes crystallization, a moment that everything becomes clear, and it's time for that."

John looked into Leo's eyes, his knowing stare, his confidence, his will, and it was there in his eyes and Leo knew he still didn't understand. But there was something else in John's eyes, a hope, a trust, and Leo trusted that John knew what Leo would come to know, and Leo was content in that. He could wait to know.

"You'll be alright this time, Leo." John said. "Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine."

With that, before Leo was ready, John moved behind Leo and pushed him off the edge.

Leo tumbled down, his mouth an agape, speeding toward the deep pool at the base of the waterfall.

Right before Leo hit the water the last thing he saw was John's eyes. They were smiling.

[118] The Water

Myriads of white bubbles, his hands groping in front of his face, churning, crashing, a cacophony of water and language and feelings, all spilling into his lungs, through him, over him, in him, the lost baby, Tamara, his father, all those things bleeding together, washing away, and he felt it then, it loosened, just a little, and then a little more, and then speeding, surging up and up, pouring out, tides, torrents, and finally, the crystallization, it was there, shattering, he broke the surface, gasped, pulled clean air into his lungs, and he knew, he knew now, and yes, yes, John was right.

He would be alright this time. Everything was going to be fine.

[Epilogue]

Leo wrote the last word and placed the end page on top of the stack. The story was done. He'd written it all down and it was done. It was all he needed to say, every word was there.

He pushed back from the desk and heard Tamara calling from the other room. The office door opened and she stuck her head in. She looked beautiful, her red hair framing her face.

"What did you say?" Leo asked.

"I said," she took three steps into the room. She smiled at him. "I need to go to the store. We're out of milk. I need you to watch John while I'm gone. He needs to be changed."

She winked at him. "Think you can handle that?"

Leo stood up from his chair, still a little dazed. He walked over to her, pulled her against him and kissed her.

"Yes," he said, pulling back. "I believe I can."

[Author's Note]

This story has been long in coming. I've been working on it for over four years. It began as a simple adventure story - I wanted to write a story about a young man who traveled around the empty United States thinking about his life. Over its writing the story has taken many forms, finally evolving into its current version, far past its humble beginnings.

I'd like to thank all the people who've helped me grapple with the ideas here, helped me try to articulate something that's been a part of my life for so long:

My father. My mother.

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